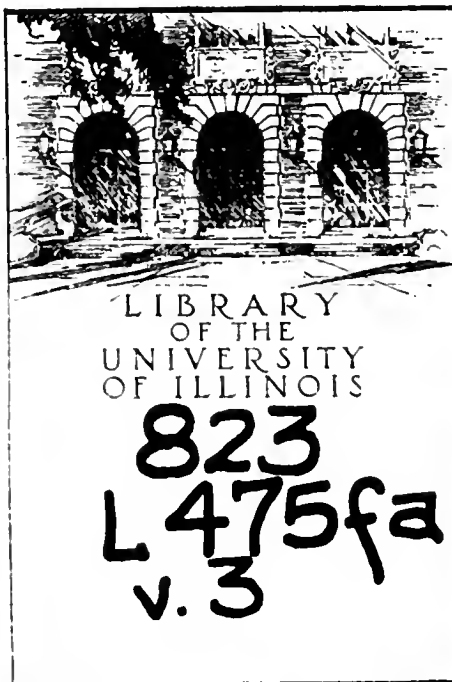


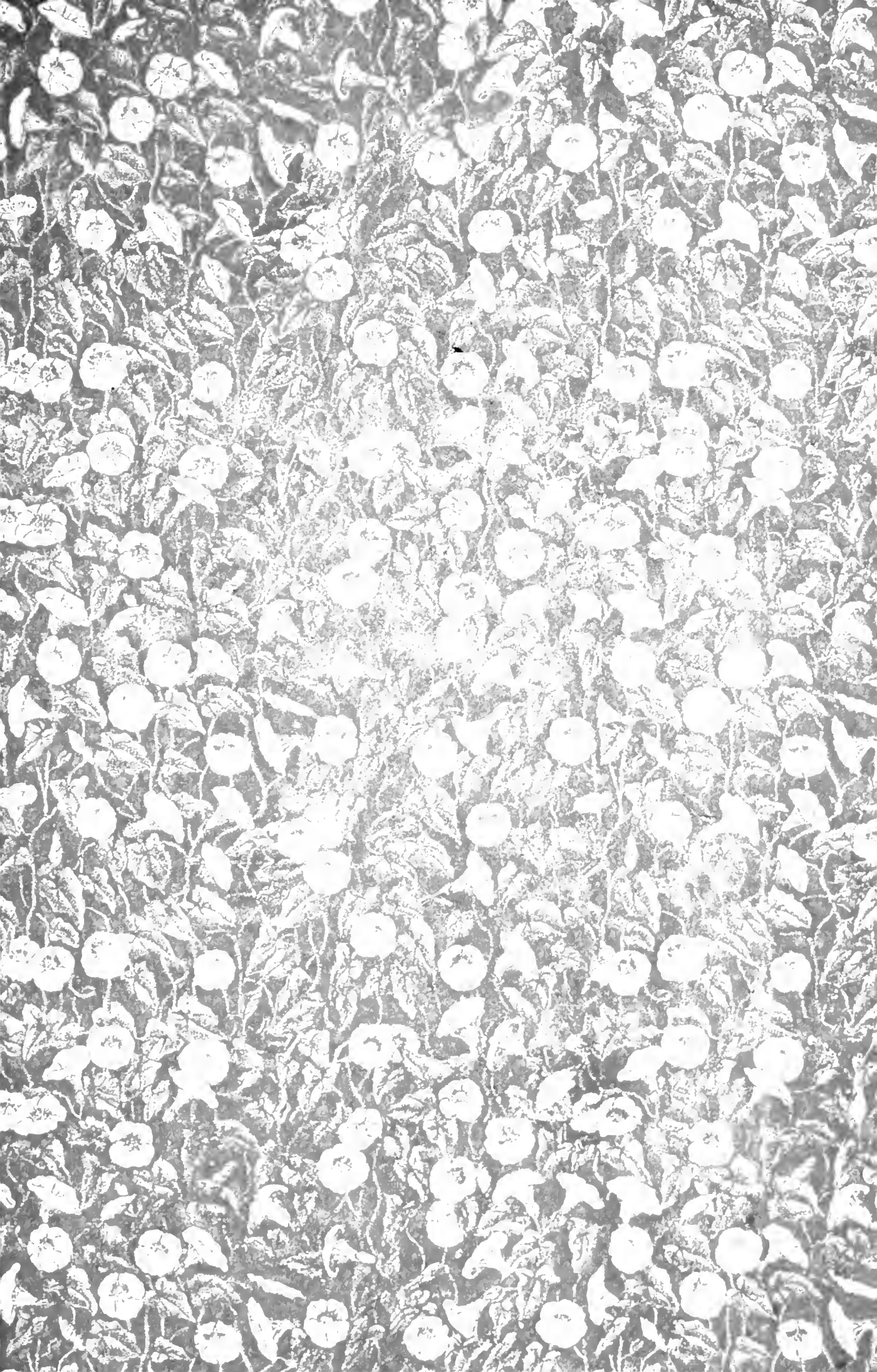
FATAL SILENCE

Denique Caelum.

William Melville.

No. 1216





A FATAL SILENCE

VOL. III.

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A FATAL SILENCE

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT

AUTHOR OF

‘LOVE’S CONFLICT,’ ‘VÉRONIQUE,’ ETC., ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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CONTENTS.

—o—

CHAPTER I.	
	PAGE
THE DOCTOR AND THE WIDOW,	1

CHAPTER II.	
THE FINAL BREACH,	30

CHAPTER III.	
A TERRIBLE DISCOVERY,	62

CHAPTER IV.	
THE FATE OF PAULIE,	91

CHAPTER V.	
ON THE TRAIL,	115

CHAPTER VI.	
THE WIFE'S DECEPTION,	139

CHAPTER VII.

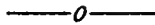
	PAGE
AN ANONYMOUS LETTER,	168

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DÉNOÛEMENT,	197
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A FATAL SILENCE

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CHAPTER I.

THE DOCTOR AND THE WIDOW.

BUT, as he hastened from the stables to the house, he was met on the threshold by the parish doctor, Charles Addison, a young fellow of six-and-twenty, who had come straight from his hospital practice to Deepdale, and was crammed to the muzzle with the latest discoveries and methods and ways. He smiled broadly as he encountered the anxious husband.

‘Come, Rushton,’ he exclaimed cheerfully, ‘there’s nothing to look alarmed about. We’ve done bravely without you, and it’s all over.

There's a little daughter waiting upstairs for you, man.'

'A daughter,' repeated Hal vaguely. 'But my wife. How is my wife?'

'As well as a woman can possibly be under the circumstances, and quite ready to see you, if you will promise not to stay with her more than five minutes. How about the nurse?'

'I am sorry to say I have been unable to hear anything about her,' replied Hal, as the colour returned to his cheeks. 'She is out in the country somewhere, and I could not even gain her address. This youngster having arrived somewhat before its time—'

'Not a bit of it,' rejoined the young doctor, decisively, 'the child is full grown, and a very good-sized infant into the bargain.'

'Well, let me say, before it was expected, then, for I know my wife was led to believe by Mrs Rushton—'

'I don't like that old woman. I beg your pardon, Rushton, I should have said old lady.'

'No, you shouldn't,' replied Hal, with quaint

candour; 'she isn't a lady, and you cannot possibly dislike her more than I do. But to-night it was a case of Hobson's choice. There was no one else capable of attending to Mrs Rushton, and I was compelled to call in her assistance. But, my dear boy, you are not going home without something to eat and drink. Come with me into the dining-room.'

'Don't disturb your servants, Rushton, on my account. I'll take a brandy-and-soda, but I couldn't swallow anything to save my life. Do you know that it's close upon two o'clock? Miss Rushton is just an hour old. She was born on the stroke of one. I drink to her health,' said Addison, as he raised the glass to his lips.

Hal joined him, but he was too much excited to attend to what his companion was saying, and in pity for his anxiety the doctor rose to go home, promising to return the first thing in the morning, and cautioning him not to let his wife talk much or excite herself. As soon as he had taken his departure, Hal flew impatiently to the sick-room. Paula was lying there alone.

In the next apartment, the door of which stood open, he could distinguish a murmur of voices mingled with the unmistakable wail of a newborn infant. But Hal could think of no one at that moment but his wife, given back, as it seemed to him, from the jaws of death. He went softly up to the bedside, and bending over her, placed his head on the same pillow, partly to hide the tears that had risen to his eyes.

‘*My* Paula,’ he whispered, ‘my *own* dear Paula. I am *so* thankful.’

She turned her face towards him, white and drawn with the suffering she had gone through, but calm as an angel’s, and radiant with gratitude.

‘Oh, Hal, dearest, so am I. It is all over, thank God, and I feel so well. I wanted nothing—but *you*.’

He kissed her a dozen times as he said,—

‘I have not brought Mrs Cornes, I am sorry to say, Paula, for she is away from home at present, but perhaps in a few days—’

‘Oh, never mind, dear Hal. It doesn’t signify.

Nothing signifies now. It is all right, Have you seen the baby—*our* baby, Hal?’

‘Not yet, dearest. I have been able to think of nothing but my gratitude that my love is spared to me.’

‘Were you disappointed to hear she was a girl?’

‘Not at all, darling. I love little girls, and shall spoil my white rosebud for her mother’s sake.’

Paula began to laugh feebly.

‘She isn’t much like a *white* rosebud at present,’ she said, and then Hal remembered the doctor’s caution not to let her talk, nor excite herself.

‘I must leave you now, Paula. Addison limited my visit to five minutes. Do you feel sleepy?’

‘Yes, very. I have only kept my eyes open till I could see your dear face.’

‘Then close them now, dear child, and I will sit by you till you are asleep.’

And in a few moments the hand that lay in

his relaxed its clasp, and Paula lay back on her pillows, unconscious of everything. Hal drew the bedclothes gently over her, and with one last look was about to creep out of the room, when he remembered the child. Even at that moment, when curiosity and a new sensation, which he could scarcely define, were strong upon him, he seemed to shrink from gazing for the first time upon his infant in the presence of Mrs Rushton. But the more powerful feeling prevailed, and he walked on tiptoe into the next room. There he found Louisa employed in airing linen, and making preparations for the night, whilst the widow, looking like a Hecate, with her grey wisps of hair tumbling over her face, was seated before a fire, with a bundle of flannel in her lap.

‘Where is the baby?’ he inquired, as he stepped over the threshold.

‘Lor’, ‘Al, ‘ow you did startle me!’ exclaimed Mrs Rushton. ‘I was as near hoff to sleep as possible. And when did you come ‘ome?’

‘Oh, never mind. Half an hour ago.’

‘And you ’aven’t brought Mrs Cornes?’

‘No; she is not at home. Let me see the child.’

‘Oh, ’ere’s the child, safe enough,’ cried the widow, as she drew back the flannel and displayed a little red, pulpy face and two weak, blinking eyes. ‘But this is bad noos for me. Didn’t you ’ear when she’d *be* ’ome, ’Al, nor where she’d gone to?’

‘No, no, I could hear nothing. I’ll tell you all about it to-morrow. Don’t speak so loud or you may wake Mrs Rushton. She is asleep. And so that is my baby. What a funny little thing it is.’

‘Yes, she ain’t much to look at,’ replied the widow depreciatingly, ‘but I’ve seen weaker babies pull through before now. It all depends on their constitootions.’

‘Is she weakly?’ demanded Hal, with a sudden fear.

‘Well, you could ’ardly expect ’er to be strong, with the tantrums Mrs ’Al ’as put ’erself into the last few months. But, as I says before, I

daresay, with care and proper attention, as she'll pull through.'

'She seems very small to me,' observed Hal, who had never seen a new-born baby before.

'Oh, she *is* small, no doubt of that. Lor', I've 'andled 'em twice this size. But the next few weeks will decide it. If they goes over the month there's more chance of rearing 'em.'

'Dr Addison seems to think she's a very healthy baby, and that my wife has gone through it remarkably well.'

'*Dr Haddison!*' exclaimed Mrs Rushton, with supreme contempt. 'What can 'e know, a lad like that compared to *me*, who 'ave nussed dozens? Why, there'd been a fine business if *I* 'adn't been 'ere. 'E was as nervous as a cat. Mrs 'Al, she may thank 'er stars I was hon the spot or this poor little creetur would never 'ave come into the world halive. Dr Haddison, indeed! I don't know what Mrs Cornes will say to 'im, but 'e don't hinterfere with *me* while *I'm* 'ere. A trumperious bit of a lad like that! I

was very sorry hafterwards has I sent for 'im hat all—'

'I should have been very much annoyed if you had not,' replied Hal. 'But where is Mrs Measures? Has she gone home?'

'*Mrs Measures*,' reiterated the widow; 'theer's another of your fine ladies as can do nothink but talk. Gone 'ome? I should think she 'ad. I bundled 'er hoff as quick as I could. I said, begging your pardon ma'am, you're no use 'ere, but a 'indrance, and the sooner you go 'ome the better. And so she went.'

'Well, I cannot discuss these subjects with you to-night, an' it is time we were all in bed,' said Hal. 'Where do you sleep, Mrs Rushton?'

'I don't sleep nowheers, 'Al, till Mrs Cornes comes to take my place. In course, you know nothing of sich matters or you'd be aware as the nurse's place is to sit up till the patient is hout of danger.'

'But my wife is not in danger *now*, surely?'

cried Hal fearfully.

The widow smiled with lofty pity for his ignorance.

‘They’re *hall* in danger till they’re hup,’ she said, ‘and Mrs ’Al, she’s none too strong, I can tell you, and I couldn’t sleep a wink, not if you was to put me on a bed of roses, until Mrs Cornes comes to take my place. And so I sits ’ere, ’Al, till the morning.’

‘You are very good. I don’t know how to thank you,’ replied the poor young husband, whose sudden happiness seemed to be all quenched, as he walked away, and instead of going to bed as he intended to do, went downstairs, with a sinking heart, and lay on the sofa in the dining-room, thinking of all the terrible chances that had been presented to his mind by Mrs Rushton’s words. He crept upstairs several times before the dawn, and listened at the door of his wife’s bedroom to see if he could hear anything to justify his fears, but with the exception of Mrs Rushton’s sonorous snoring, and an occasional little cry from the infant, no sound met his ears. With the early

summer sun came the young doctor to learn how his patient had passed the night, and to him Hal confided the opinions which the widow had expressed concerning both the mother and child. Charles Addison laughed her ideas to scorn.

‘Only an old woman’s cackle, my dear fellow,’ he said. ‘Don’t pay the least attention to it. They love to make the worst of everything. Take my word for it that Mrs Rushton is going on perfectly well, and the baby is a fine thriving child, and don’t let the old woman do anything against my orders for either of them. But I can see she has an obstinate temper, and you’ll have to keep a sharp lookout over her.’

‘She is considered to be an excellent nurse, and seems to spare herself no trouble,’ remarked Hal.

‘Oh, I daresay,’ replied the other, ‘still, I wish you could get rid of her.’

‘I will, as soon as ever my wife can do without her, but just now her presence is inevitable—is it not?’

‘Oh, certainly, certainly,’ replied the doctor. ‘But I don’t like her eye. She reminds me of a vicious horse.’

Hal laughed at the simile, but he was comforted by Charles Addison’s opinion, and resolved to follow out his directions. The issue seemed to justify what the young doctor had said. Paula continued to progress favourably, and the child appeared to thrive. Indeed, after the first few hours it gave no trouble whatever, but seemed to sleep day and night. But Hal, though delighted to see the improvement in his wife, and to watch the colour (so long lost) returning to her face, and the light to her eyes, could not get over his aversion to and his distrust of his father’s widow, and watched her as a cat watches a mouse. The first breach between them happened on this wise.

It was a very warm, still afternoon in June, about ten days after the baby’s birth. The summer had suddenly burst upon them, and the heat was oppressive. Everything in nature

seemed to stand still, and silence reigned throughout Highbridge Hall. Hal had come in from his usual round of inspection of the farm, and having taken off his thick boots, thought he would have a look at Paula before he shod himself again. So he went upstairs in his stockinged feet, and lifted the curtain that hung before her bedroom door—left open on account of the heat. There she lay, like a white rose (as he had so often fondly called her), with a bunch of flowers that he had laid that morning on her pillow in her hand, and her baby on her arm, both slumbering peacefully in the noonday heat. Hal gazed at them for a few moments, feeling very happy the while, and then turned his attention to the whereabouts of Mrs Rushton, who usually occupied an arm-chair in the same room on such occasions. But she was not there. Hal fancied he heard a rustling in the next apartment, which had been dedicated *pro tem.* to the baby, and crossing the bedroom floor lightly he looked in. His stepmother was sitting with her

back towards him, profoundly occupied with, and evidently deeply interested in, the contents of a chest of drawers which held private property of Paula's. There she sat with a pile of old letters and papers in her lap, each one of which she carefully examined before she laid it aside. Hal's blood boiled over with indignation at the sight. He had known something of this proclivity on the part of the widow before, but he had not thought she would have dared to indulge it in his house. He entered the room—closed the door carefully behind him—and advanced steadily to Mrs Rushton's side.

'What are you doing there?' he asked her sternly.

She turned, and recognising him, grew livid, and tossed the papers back into the drawer.

'No 'arm, 'Al. I'm trying to make some room for the baby's things in her ma's drawers, and so I thought I'd pack these 'ere papers, which don't seem no good, in a box, and put 'em under the bed. Ain't I right?' said the

widow, but her voice shook with trepidation the while.

‘*Right!* to take my wife’s keys and open her chest of drawers and read her private letters,’ exclaimed Hal. ‘You know you are doing one of the meanest, dirtiest tricks of which a woman is capable. How *dare* you do it in *my* house? I am not a feeble, half-witted old man like my poor father, remember, whom you juggled and deceived, to the last day of his life, and nearly caused to die with a sin upon his soul. I will not stand such knavery for a moment. Give me back those keys at once, and never presume to touch them again whilst you remain at the Hall.’

‘Well, this is a nice reward for hall I’ve done for you and yours,’ whimpered the widow, ‘a-sitting hup to nuss your wife and child, and a-straining my back and hupsetting my nerves—demeaning myself to be a servant, and jest because my poor dear husband, who never spoke sich words to me as *you* ’ave, was your father, and asked me to be kind to

you for 'is sake. You seem to forget as I've saved you a five-pound note in coming 'ere instead of Mrs Cornes, which I wish I'd never done it.'

Hal remembered then that she had been of use to them in the time of need, and relented of his harsh tones.

'To say nothink,' continued Mrs Rushton, in an injured tone, 'of 'aving slaved like a blackamoor for Mrs 'Al for months past, while she lay like a log on 'er sofa, and 'ardly gave one a "thank you" when all was said and done for 'er.'

'I have not forgotten it,' returned Hal, less sternly; 'it was against my wishes, but my wife was not in a condition to be argued with, and you were certainly a great help to her. I will see that you are not the loser by it. But this act of yours almost cancels the obligation. Where did you procure these keys?'

'Where did I procure 'em?' reiterated Mrs Rushton, in an insolent tone. 'Why, 'hoff 'er ladyship's mantelpiece, to be sure. You don't

suppose I stole 'em, do you? And as for 'er rubbishy papers, as ought to be be'ind the fire, what hinterest could *I* 'ave in 'em except to clear the place and make it a bit tidy—a bit more like it was when *I* was the missus 'ere, as I should have been to this day if my poor dear 'usband 'ad 'ad 'is way.'

'We do not require your assistance in tidying-up, thank you,' returned Hal curtly; 'we have servants to do that work. Be good enough to put all those papers back into the drawers, and *I* will take care they are not meddled with again.'

He stood by whilst she bundled the packets of letters and scraps of newspapers into their places, with a countenance full of hatred, malice and revenge. When she had finished the task, he fitted the key into the lock and turned it. As he did so he caught sight of a photograph in the pocket of Mrs Rushton's apron.

'What is that you have concealed in your pocket? he asked. She jerked it out.

'Lor,' if one of the rubbishy things ain't

dropt into my apron pocket. You needn't look as if you thought I was a-going to steal it, 'Al. *That* ain't likely to be of much use to me, when I don't heven know who the people hare.'

'And it is not necessary that you should know,' remarked her stepson, as he took the cardboard picture from her and locked it away with the rest.

But the sight of it sent a sudden thrill through his heart, half pain and half fear. It was a faded photograph, taken some time before, of poor Mrs Sutton, with little Paulie seated on her knee. He turned it quickly round. There were no names upon the other side. The knowledge afforded him relief, and as he secured it from further curiosity he put Paula's bunch of keys into his own pocket.

'I don't want to say anything more about this very unpleasant business at present, Mrs Rushton, he remarked before he left the room, 'for my wife's sake, and because any quarrelling would certainly upset her. But don't let it be repeated —that's all.'

'Oh, *h'I* don't wish to repeat it,' cried the

widow insolently. 'Heverything may go to 'ell before *I'll* touch 'em agen, for I don't get no gratitude for nothing I does, and that's a fact.'

Hal Rushton left her without another word, but it did not smooth her ruffled temper to perceive that before he went downstairs again he tried the lock of every drawer and cupboard in the room to satisfy himself that they were secure.

'Very good, Mr 'Al,' said the widow to herself, as he disappeared, 'very good. It hain't *you* I'm thinking as will get the best of *this* bargain. You won't make no row because of your "dear wife's sake," and because you wants my 'elp still for 'er and 'er brat, though you don't say it, but you forgets as they're both in my 'ands, and I can do with 'em pretty well as I like. I wish I 'ad my Ted to consult with now. 'E'd set things right pretty sharp. But it won't do for me to leave my post, for that doctor don't like me—I can see that plainly—and would be glad of hany hexcuse to give me the sack. Lor', there's Mrs 'Al a-calling. I

won't do to let 'er see as there's been a row. Well, my dear,' the old hypocrite was saying the next minute, 'and what do you want? Will you 'ave a cup of tea and a bit of bread and butter. It ain't quite the time, but you'd better take it if you've a mind to.'

'No, thank you, Mrs. Rushton. I would rather wait till Hal comes up to take it with me. But will you take baby now? She has made my arm ache. Fancy her being still asleep. What a little sleepyhead she is. She seems never awake.'

'Babies generally sleep 'alf their time,' remarked the widow, as she lifted up the infant preparatory to carrying it away. 'Sometimes it's a sign of 'ealth, and sometimes of weakness. I 'opes this little missy will get more wakeful as she grows stronger.'

'Do you think she is weaker than she ought to be?' inquired Paula, with a mother's quick alarm.

'Well, she might be stronger, of course. She ain't so lively as some, nor she don't take her

food so reg'lar, but, as you nusses 'er yourself, I daresay she'll get on all right by-and-by.'

These words sunk deep into Paula's heart, and that evening, as she was again lying with her baby on her arm, and Hal was sitting by her side, she asked him if she didn't think the little one looked rather pale.

Hal laughed at the idea.

'*Pale*, my darling. She generally looks the colour of a beet to me, particularly when she first wakes up and doubles her fists into her face.'

'But, Hal, she is so seldom awake, and when she is asleep, the colour seems all to fade away. Look at her now. Her face is quite white, and it seems puffy to me. I—I—feel afraid sometimes that she is not very strong.'

'I think it must be your fancy, darling. Addison assured me she was a very healthy child.'

'But he has not seen her since she was born, and Mrs Rushton has such a peculiar way of talking of her frightens me. Oh, Hal, suppose

I was to lose her too,' she whispered, with her face close to his.

'But I can't have you even suppose such a thing, Paula. There is no reason for it. We will show the baby to Addison the next time he comes, and he will tell you that you are frightening yourself for nothing. Why, she is as plump as a little partridge.'

'She is not so plump as she was when she was born,' replied Paula, with a sad smile, 'and I am sure your stepmother does not consider her strong.'

This conversation made Hal despatch a message at once to young Addison, who was with them in half an hour.

'What's the matter now?' he asked as he entered the room, where Mrs Rushton immediately joined them. 'Nothing wrong, I hope?'

'*I'm* the person you should put *that* question to, young man!' interposed the widow loftily. 'When you've been a few years in the profession, you will know it's the nurse who is halfways appealed to for the 'ealth of the patients.'

‘Thank you for teaching me my business,’ replied the doctor coolly. ‘But I was addressing this lady. Don’t you feel so well, Mrs Rushton?’

‘Oh, yes, doctor. I am getting on beautifully, thank you. But my baby seems so very sleepy. We can hardly rouse her, even to take her food; and this evening she appears pale and puffy to me (though, perhaps, it is only the fading light), so I felt a little anxious that you should see her.’

At this announcement Mrs Rushton became unnecessarily indignant. She seized the child up in her arms almost roughly, and was about to carry it away into the next room.

‘Here’s a fuss about nothing,’ she exclaimed rudely. ‘I should think you might find something better to trouble the doctor about than that, Mrs ’Al. And you might trust *my* words a little more hinto the bargain. ’Aven’t I told you hover and hover again has the child is hall right. And this is the nuss’s business hand *not* the doctor’s, as can’t possibly know ’alf so much of hinfants has I do.’ And she turned her back on the party as she spoke.

‘Mrs Rushton,’ said Dr Addison in a determined voice, ‘bring that child here.’

‘But there ain’t nothink the matter with it. It’s has well has it can be, and I won’t ’ave *my* business interfered with by no doctors, nor ladies either.’

‘Bring that child here,’ he repeated sternly.

She returned to the bedside then, and held the baby out for his inspection. Dr Addison examined its eyes and skin and mouth, whilst Hal and Paula watched him narrowly.

‘Nothing the matter here,’ he exclaimed cheerfully, as he finished his examination. ‘Mrs Rushton is quite right, and the baby will do very well by-and-by.’

‘Didn’t I say so?’ observed the widow, as she bore the child away. ‘But there, hevery lad has as got a diploma must know more than a woman has as nussed and monthlied for twenty years.’

‘I am afraid I am not a favourite with that old lady,’ remarked Addison gaily, when she had disappeared. ‘Her allusions to my youth are too

cruel. However, I must bear it with what fortitude I can.'

'She is excessively rude,' replied Paula. 'But do you *really* think my baby is all right?'

'I really think, my dear lady, that there is no need for disquietude, and the calmer you keep yourself the better she will thrive.' And then he talked with the husband and wife on indifferent topics, until it was time for him to go away. 'I will just say a word to the nurse before I take my leave,' he observed, as he walked into the next room. But it was empty.

The widow, to avoid a second catechism, had taken the baby downstairs with her. Addison took advantage of the occasion to open the toilet-table and washing-stand drawers, and to generally pry round the premises. At length, behind a clock on the mantelpiece, he seemed to come upon what he was searching for, and he put it, without demur, into his pocket.

'The nurse has vanished. I suppose we shall find her downstairs,' he said as he returned to Paula's room.

‘You’ve been a long time looking for her,’ replied Hal, laughing.

‘Yes. I was taking a survey of the apartment. It’s a nice airy one. Good evening, Mrs Rushton. You have not the slightest cause for fear. Please lie there in peace, and get well.’ But he secretly telegraphed to Hal to follow him out of the room. ‘I wish to speak to you alone,’ he said, as they went downstairs and entered the dining-room together.

‘Now, Rushton,’ commenced the doctor, as soon as they were alone, ‘you must get rid of that old woman at once. What her object is I cannot say, but she is dosing your child, and I won’t answer for the consequences if it is left in her charge.’

‘*Dosing it!*’ exclaimed Hal, starting; ‘but what with?’

‘Laudanum, or a preparation of it. I saw that at once from the child’s appearance, and when I searched the room I found the bottle. Here it is,’ said Addison, holding it up.

‘The old fiend! How I wish I had never

let her come here. She wants to murder it, cried the excited young father.

‘Hush, my dear fellow. That is going too far. It is probably only ignorance. These old women have terrible methods sometimes with regard to new-born infants, and they will not be interfered with. You saw how indignant she was at my presuming to pass an opinion upon it. But it must be stopped, and at once. And the only way to do it is by giving the child to another nurse. Mrs Rushton is both obstinate and vindictive, and would probably increase the doses if remonstrated with.’

‘What can she do it for, Addison?’

‘To make the baby sleep, and save herself trouble.’

‘My poor little child! You are sure she has not injured it?’

‘I am quite sure that, out of her hands, it will be as well as ever in a day or two. Your wife is quite right. That sleep was an unnatural one, but, of course, I would not tell her so.’

‘But who will take this woman’s place? There is no other nurse in the neighbourhood.’

‘Perhaps not. But I know a very respectable woman — a farmer’s wife — who will be quite competent to take charge of the baby until you get a regular nurse for it, and will carry out my directions faithfully. She is a Mrs Roberts. Shall I go and fetch her? I would not leave that child another hour in Mrs Rushton’s hands if I were you.’

‘I will *not*,’ replied Hal determinately, as he rang the bell. Louisa answered it.

‘Where is Mrs Rushton?’ he asked.

‘In the drawing-room, sir, with the baby.’

‘Tell her to come here to me.’

‘Excuse me,’ interrupted the doctor, ‘but she would probably refuse. Let us go to her, and Louisa you must come also. We shall want you to hold the baby until we get another nurse for it.’

Stern as officers of justice, the two young men, accompanied by the housemaid, entered the drawing-room. The widow was pacing up

and down it, with the infant in her arms. Hal walked straight up to her and took it in his own.

‘And what’s that for?’ she demanded shrilly.

‘We have a question to put to you, Mrs Rushton, which requires your whole attention,’ said the doctor. ‘*What* have you been giving to that child?’

CHAPTER II.

THE FINAL BREACH.

THE widow's yellow complexion turned a sort of green-grey colour with indignation and surprise.

‘What ’ave I been a giving ’er? What do you mean by your himperence?’ she exclaimed.

‘I mean what I say. I’m the medical officer of this parish, and if you don’t answer me I shall report you. What have you been dosing this baby with?’

‘A fine medical hofficer, indeed! A mere paltry boy who knows nothink. I’ve not given ’er hanything but what’s good for ’er. She’s ’ad the breast. What do you make of that?’

‘Do you call *this* the breast, Mrs Rushton?’

said Addison, producing the vial from his pocket.

‘*That!* Why, that’s what I keep for my toothache. You thinks yourself mighty clever, I daresay, but you’ve found a mare’s nest this time.’

‘Whatever you keep it for, you have given the baby some of it, and you have made her ill in consequence. I have strongly advised Mr Rushton to take her out of your hands. I do not consider she is safe in them.’

‘Oh, *you* don’t consider it, don’t you,’ she cried mockingly, ‘*you*, who was in your swaddling clothes when I was a full-grown woman? You’re a nice person, you are, to pass an opinion on the matter. If Mrs ‘Al ‘ad ‘ad a grain of sense she wouldn’t ‘ave let sich a hignoramus across the threshold.’

‘Be quiet,’ said Hal authoritatively. ‘I will not allow you to insult this gentleman in my house.’

‘Oh, *your* ‘ouse, indeed. It’s only by a fluke as it *is* your ‘ouse. A fine pair of gentlemen,

as ought to be follerin' the plough and serving in a chemist's shop instead of setting themselves hup above their betters.'

'Now, come, Mrs Rushton,' said the doctor, 'you had better be careful what you say, for it is in my power to do you a considerable injury.'

'Oh, I'm not afraid of what you can do to *me*, young man — *me*, who am a hinde-pendent lady, and would 'ave been the howner of this very 'ouse hif my poor dear 'usband adn't been bullied out of it on 'is dying bed.'

'With what motive you have administered a dangerous narcotic to a newly born infant I cannot say, but if it is from ignorance, it proves you to be utterly unfit to have the charge of a baby. I have told Mr Rushton so openly. If you were a hired nurse, I should order you out of the house at once—as it is, I must leave your stepson to do as he thinks best in the matter. I have expressed my opinion, and there my duty ends. Is it decided that I am to see Mrs Roberts, Rushton?'

‘Most certainly. See her as soon as you can.’

‘I will go there at once, and she will probably be here in an hour. Good evening.’ And Dr Addison left the room.

‘And pray ’oo’s Mrs Roberts?’ demanded the widow as the doctor disappeared.

‘That is just what I am going to tell you,’ replied Hal. Then he turned to Louisa, who was holding the baby, and said, ‘Take that child back to the nursery, and if your mistress should ask for Mrs Rushton, say she is talking to me in the drawing-room, nothing more. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, sir,’ said the girl, as she carried the child away.

When she found that they were alone, the widow trembled. With all her insolence, she was a coward, and very much afraid of her stepson’s wrath. She began by trying to brave it out.

‘Well, I’m awaiting to ’ear ’oo Mrs Roberts may be,’ she said, looking Hal full in the face.

‘And I am quite ready to tell you,’ he answered. ‘She is a woman who is coming to look after my wife and child, in your place.’

‘Ho! And I’m to be kicked hout, I s’pose, like a dog, hafter hall I’ve done for ’em, jest because that fool of a doctor ’as got up a cock-and-bull story about my toothache mixture.’

‘Don’t speak to me like that,’ thundered Hal, losing his patience. ‘You *know* it is not a cock-and-bull story. You know that, for some reason best known to yourself, you have given my poor baby that poisonous stuff, that the sleep she has been thrown into in consequence was an unnatural one, and that, if her mother had not perceived it in time, you might have killed her.’

‘Oh, her *mother!*’ cried the widow sarcastically. ‘It’s strange she should know such a lot about babies, ain’t it? ’Tain’t hoften as ladies with their first know ’ow long they should sleep and ’ow long they should keep awake. She’s uncommon clever is Mrs ’Al. One would think she’d ’ad ’alf-a-dozen already.’

Hal felt the blood rush to his face at the insinuation, but he answered firmly,—

‘Never you mind what she knows or does not know. She has evidently been too clever for you in this instance. Now, Mrs Rushton, you and I must understand each other. Whether you did this thing in ignorance or from *malice prepense*, you will never do it again, for from this hour I forbid you, or your son Ted Snaley, to put your foot within the gate of my grounds. Do you understand me?’

‘Hunderstand you! Do you s’pose I’m a hijiot that I can’t hunderstand you? But I might ’ave hexpected as much. You come of a mean, ungrateful lot. Hif your father ’adn’t been a fool and a coward, ’e wouldn’t never ’ave let a canting parson frighten ’im out of ’is passed word.’

‘Don’t you dare to abuse my dead father or I’ll put you out of the house with my own hands,’ cried Hal. ‘Do you suppose that, if he hadn’t been weak enough to make you his wife, you would ever have been tolerated in

it? You have dared me to tell you the truth, and you shall have it. It was my full intention when I married never to let you visit nor associate with my wife. But she has a kind heart, and you got round her in some way, and I didn't like to check her generous impulses. But I was terribly annoyed when I found you had wormed your way into the Hall again, and still more when by the unfortunate accident of Mrs Cornes' absence you took her place by Paula's bedside. For I have never trusted you, Mrs Rushton. I remember how you lied to and deceived and robbed my father, and I had no belief in your behaving better to his son. And I was right. You have nearly robbed us now of the best thing we possess—our child. And so there's an end to it. Our acquaintanceship is over from to-day.'

He spoke hotly as a man would under such circumstances, but he spoke determinately, and it was evident that what he said he meant. This conviction made the widow reckless of her answer.

‘And a good job hif it had died hif it’s agoing to grow up like its mother,’ she exclaimed.

‘Don’t you say a word against my wife to me,’ thundered Hal, turning round upon her, with lowering brows.

‘Oh, you needn’t think that none of your bawling, nor your black looks, will frighten *me*,’ she cried. ‘I know many a thing has would make your fine madam lower ’er crest, and so do hothers hin Deepdale. *She* knows if hit’s to ’er hinterest to keep friends with *me* or not. You may himagine you knows hall about ’er, Mr ’Al, but you hain’t a Solomon, nor yet a detective, and the lookers-on see most of the game.’

‘Silence, woman!’ he exclaimed angrily. But he did not like to raise his voice for fear of disturbing Paula.

‘No, I *won’t* be silent,’ returned the widow defiantly, ‘not for you nor hanybody, and if this his to be hour last hinterview, you shall ’ave my mind. Don’t you try to touch me,’ she

continued, as Hal approached her threateningly, 'or I'll 'ave you hup for an assault, and speak hout what I know before the perlice. You takes your fine school teacher, as is found locked up with a man at night, and makes 'er the mistress of this 'ouse, and fancies as the 'ole county's agoing to bow down before 'er, and madam she makes henemies of those as might 'ave been 'er friends. Do you s'pose they 'aven't talked of what they know against 'er? Where are hall the grand ladies and gentlemen as come to your "feet"? Where's my Lady Bristowe, and my Lady Warden, and the Honourable Mrs Stacey, hand the rest of 'em? Why, Lady Bristowe she says hopenly has she never was so deceived in hany young woman before, and she'll never henter the 'ouse again.'

'I don't wish her to do so. I have not the slightest interest in anything you may be able to tell me. I know the malice of which you are capable. All I want you to do now is to leave my house, and never enter it again,'

‘And I’m ready to leave it, ’Al, but I don’t go till you’ve ’eard the ’ole of what I’ve to say. I daresay my lady hupstairs ’ave given you a very plausible hexplanation of her doings in the school’ouse, and you’re fool enough to swaller it. But that hain’t the last of hit—mark my words—nor that man hain’t the last of them, neither, and she’ll bring you to shame yet, though your father’s widder hain’t good enough to associate with ’er; and hall I says his, I prays ’Evin as she may.’

‘You wicked woman,’ exclaimed Hal, ‘how I can have endured you and your blistering tongue about me so long I cannot tell. But in slandering my wife to my face you have cut your own throat. I intended to have let you remain in Wavertree Cottage. I will do so no longer. I will not endure such a reptile as you are at my very gate. To-morrow you will receive a notice to quit, and you may find yourself a home wherever you can.’

‘You will turn us out of the cottage?’ cried the widow shrilly.

‘Yes, I will turn you out of the cottage. You deserve no favour nor kindness at my hands, and I will not have my wife’s life polluted by your presence.’

‘*Your wife!* Your wife, indeed. A pretty person to be polluted. There were men before you, ‘Al Rushton, and there’ll be men after you—mark that—and you’ll live to remember my words, and to curse the day you ever met ‘er.’

‘Will you leave my house, or am I to put you out of it?’ exclaimed Hal.

‘Oh, I’m agoing, you needn’t fear, but not without my belongings. I’ve lost enough by coming to the ‘ouse at all without leaving them be’ind me.’ And as she spoke she moved to the door.

‘You shall not go upstairs,’ said Hal, placing himself in her way.

‘But I *must* go hupstairs. ‘Ow am I to get my things helse? You don’t suppose has I would trust ‘em to hanybody. Stand hout of my way, ‘Al, and let me pass.’

‘You do not enter my wife’s presence again,’

replied the young man firmly, as he rang the bell. 'Everything that belongs to you shall be brought down here, but you shall not mount the stairs.'

'But I hinsist!' she commenced.

'And *I* insist,' he replied again, with flashing eyes, that she dared not further oppose, as he walked out of the drawing-room and locked the door behind him. In another moment he was by his wife's bedside.

'Paula, darling,' he said, 'Mrs Rushton is not very well, and I am going to send her home.'

'Not well, Hal? What is the matter with her? I thought she was made of cast-iron.'

'She is not a young woman, you know, Paula, and the night work is too much for her. And you won't mind her going, because you know how much I dislike her?'

'Oh, no, dearest; I would rather be alone with you. She never let us have a moment together. But who will look after baby?'

'Dr Addison knows of a very nice woman,

a Mrs Roberts, whom he will bring over to the Hall this evening. You will be quite comfortable with her. So, if you will keep the baby beside you for a few minutes, Louisa can put Mrs Rushton's valuables together.'

'Isn't she coming up to say good-bye to me?' inquired Paula.

'No, dear, not to-night. To tell you the truth, she was so tired and anxious to see her son that I have already sent her home, and am going to despatch Tom with her things. In a few days, if you still wish to see her, we will talk about it. Meanwhile you will have a good exchange in Mrs Roberts, who is a much younger woman.'

'Poor Mrs Rushton! I am sorry I have overworked her. I am glad you have sent her home, Hal. She is too old to be up night and day,' said Paula, perfectly unsuspecting of there having been any disturbance, as she nestled down on her pillows with her baby beside her.

Louisa having accomplished the necessary packing, and carried the small box down to the

drawing-room, Hal unlocked the door again, and stood by whilst Mrs Rushton examined each article to make sure that they had not detained any of her property. Meanwhile the pony chaise had been ordered to convey her to Wavertree Cottage, and in a few minutes she and her box were placed in it and going rapidly down the drive. Hal was so dreadfully afraid of what her evil tongue might prompt her to say on parting that he only waited to see her seated before he ran upstairs to watch her departure from an upper window, and when he saw the little carriage disappear from view he heaved a deep sigh of relief.

‘Thank Heaven!’ he mentally exclaimed. ‘There is the last of that slanderous viper. Never will I show her any leniency again. Never does she put her splay foot over my threshold. She meant to kill my babe, I feel sure of it, as she would like to kill, if she dared, both Paula and myself. What a curse she has been to my family. But it is ended, and for ever.’

Yet, as he turned from the window, he did not immediately seek his wife's chamber. Slandrous as he believed the widow's tongue to be, the words she had uttered rung in his ears, and the insinuations she had made had stirred his jealous nature. A doubt in a lover's mind is almost akin to blasphemy, and in a husband's, when all opportunity for appeal is over, it is worse. Hal did not distrust Paula, and had never done so since the jealous fit he took concerning her first husband, yet he could not help remembering, when it was recalled to his mind, that she *had* deceived him (though unintentionally) on that occasion, and that she had very successfully concealed her identity and her antecedents for two years before they were revealed to him. A woman who has deceived once may deceive again. Hal Rushton did not say these words to himself, but they floated in a misty manner through his brain, after the widow had left Highbridge Hall, and he was relieved when the arrival of Dr Addison with Mrs Roberts, a plump, comely young woman of

about thirty, diverted his thoughts in another direction.

Meanwhile Mrs Rushton, senior, was having rather a rough time of it at Wavertree Cottage. When Ted Snaley understood *why* she had been so summarily dismissed, and *what* she had said to her stepson, together with the threatened ejectment from their present dwelling-house, he rounded on his mother in the way that mean, coarse natures will round upon those who have failed instead of succeeded in their attempted enterprise.

‘You gave the brat sich a dose as the doctor could find out, and cheeked ’Al till ’e turned you out of the ’ouse, and swore to take the cottage from us. Well, you *hare* a fool,’ he said, with filial piety. ‘Blest if I hever ’eard the like. And at *your* hage, too. You’ve been and gone and done it now, and no mistake. And that’s the way you advances my hinterests on the property, is it? I’m blest if I don’t feel like blowing the whole gaff to ’Al, and getting you ’auled up for hattempted murder.’

‘Oh, good Lord, Ted, you’d never go for to do sich a thing to your poor mother!’ cried the widow. ‘I did it all for the best, Ted, and hif Mrs ‘Al ‘adn’t been up to snuff, and a deal sharper than hanybody *I’ve* hever seen with her first before, heverythink would ‘ave gone right. But this hain’t the first time has she’s been a mother, I’d take my hoath of that.’

‘What do it signify to us hif it’s her first or her fifteenth,’ said Ted; ‘hit’s your blundering I’m a-talking of. Why, I could have done the job better myself. The hidea of your not waiting till the doctor was hout of the way. You’ve ruined us both now, and I’ll never forgive yer.’

‘Lor’, Ted, don’t take on in that way about it. ‘Praps ‘Al will come round again.’

‘*Come round.* Not ‘e. ‘E’s been jest awaiting for a hopportunity like this to cast hus off altogether. Hanybody but a hass could ‘ave seen that. You’ll get the notice to quit the cottage before another week’s over your ‘ead. ‘Al ain’t the man to say one thing and mean another.

And now the question is, 'ow are you a-going to keep us both on a 'undred a year?'

The widow had long since seen the mistake she had made, but she tried to smooth it over.

'Oh, we'll manage well enough, dearie,' she replied; 'we'll go and live in 'Altham. Hit'll be livelier like for both of us, and I'm a'most sick of Deepdale myself.'

'*Livelier!*' sneered her son. 'Yes, it'll be lively for me, too, when you pops off, won't it, considering as the money goes back into 'Al's pockets again? What do you s'pose I'm to do for a living *then?*'

'Couldn't you,' suggested his mother, almost timidly, 'couldn't you think hof a little work to do, Ted, afore I'm took? Not 'ard work, in course—you're not strong enough for that—but summat light, like gardening or poultry keeping, as might keep you when I'm gone?'

'No, I couldn't,' said Ted Snaley surlily. 'I hain't been brought hup to work, hand I'm not agoing to begin now. Hif you wanted me to be a working man, you should 'ave took better care

of me, and not broke my back afore I was a year old.'

'Oh, Ted, it wasn't your poor mother's fault. It was hall along of a neighbour gal as let you fall hover 'er shoulder, and never told a word about it till 'twas too late.'

'Oh, yes, that's *your* story,' replied her son mockingly, 'hand we can believe has much has we choose of it. But, hanyway, it's done, hand it can't be hundone. But hif you think I'm agoing to break it hover again with 'ard work you're mistook.'

'Well, never mind,' said Mrs Rushton, who was always anxious to conciliate her crooked, evil-tempered son, 'we'll manage to git along some'ow, Ted, and I don't s'pose I shall die jest yet. I'm honly fifty-height, you know, hand as strong and 'earty as most women of my hage. Don't you worrit hover this affair. I sees I was wrong, but I did it for the best, hand we must make the best hof a bad job.'

'Hall right,' replied Ted. 'So long as you gives me what I've bin haccustomed to I sha'n't say

nothink. But if heither of *us* 'as to work, hit'll be *you*. You're strong and 'earty (as you say), and I hain't. But my belief his as you've made such a mess hand a muddle of this 'ere business has you won't forget to your dying day.'

And Mr Ted Snaley took care that (as far as *he* was concerned) she never *should* forget it. Hal Rushton, having seen his wife and child comfortably settled for the night, and Mrs Roberts installed in office, lit his pipe and walked forth to have a quiet saunter along the country lanes. His heart was still heavy under the remembrance of his stepmother's words. However pure and worthy of esteem we may consider those we love, it is always painful to hear their names lightly spoken of, and Hal writhed under the idea that the petty, ignorant gossips of Deepdale had so misconstrued Paula's actions. How he wished she had never given them cause to doubt her integrity. Without exactly making himself more unhappy than indignant over the insults he had received through his wife, he could not help feeling low

about it, and as he thought it over he sighed more than once, and everything (for the time being) seemed flat, stale and unprofitable from Dan even to Beersheba. We have all passed through the same experience. Whether due to his liver or his friends, there are moments in every man's life when he feels it is not worth the living. Hal had not gone far, though, through the dusky lane, which was lined with sweetbriar, roses and woodbine, when he came across Mrs Measures, on her way home after the fulfilment of some parish work. She flew to meet him.

‘Oh, Mr Rushton, I am so glad to see you,’ she exclaimed. ‘How is dear Paula, and the baby? I have been so anxious for news of them.’

‘They are both going on well,’ replied Hal, as he put his pipe in his pocket. ‘But why have you not been up to see my wife, Mrs Measures? She has been looking for you daily, and so disappointed because you did not come.’

‘Well, to tell you the truth, Mr Rushton, it is on account of your stepmother. She was so rude to me, the night the baby was born, that my husband forbade my putting myself in her way again. She almost pushed me out of the room, and told me the sooner I went home the better. I can stand as much as most people, I think,’ said Mary Measures modestly, ‘but that was a little too much for me. So I have waited to hear that she is gone.’

‘I am *so* sorry, Mrs Measures,’ exclaimed Hal, with sincere regret. ‘Had I known of your having been offered such an affront I would have called at the vicarage days ago to apologise for it. But the coast is clear now. The old woman *has* gone, and for ever.’

‘*For ever!*’ repeated Mrs Measures; ‘that is a long day.’

‘Not too long to divide her and me,’ said Hal; ‘and when you have heard my story, you will say so too.’

And thereupon he told her the main incidents which had led to the expulsion of the widow from Highbridge Hall. Mary Measures was horrified at the relation.

‘Oh, Mr Rushton, I hope I am not uncharitable, but I do not believe in her ignorance. She, who has been accustomed to nursing for so many years. She must have done it on purpose. Fancy giving opium to a newly born infant. And to spite you and Paula. What a wicked old woman she must be.’

‘She ought to be hung for it,’ said Hal sternly. ‘But do not mention the subject to Paula, Mrs Measures. She knows nothing of it. We were afraid it would be too great a shock for her, and make her fear some ultimate danger to her baby. But Addison assures me that, as soon as it has slept off the last dose, it will be all right again. Thank God, the old wretch’s designs went no further.’

‘Thank God, indeed. After all dear Paula has suffered during the past year, it would be

too cruel for her to lose her baby. But how was it that Mrs Cornes made such a mistake about the time she was wanted?’

‘I have not found that out yet, Mrs Measures, but I mean to do so. Mrs Rushton had the engaging of her, and so I conclude it was part of her plan to mislead her. But the widow and her son never enter my house again. I have done with them from to-day, and I intend to take the cottage from them. They are deserving of no consideration from me.’

‘I cannot blame you, Mr Rushton. That woman’s evil tongue is the curse of Deepdale.’

‘If you could only have heard the vile insinuations she made against my wife. If she had been a man, I would have felled her to the ground. As it was, all I could do was to turn her out of my house, and forbid her to enter it again.’

‘She has never been able to say enough against Paula. I have heard it, through

many people,' observed Mrs Measures thoughtfully.

Hal took a sudden resolution.

Mrs Measures,' he said, wheeling round so as to face her, 'why has Lady Bristowe ceased to visit at our house?'

The vicar's wife did not know what to answer. She remembered her ladyship's last visit too vividly to be able to plead ignorance as to the cause of her defalcation.

'Why don't you tell me?' continued Hal. 'I never wished to know the woman, and I don't care if I never see her again, but I want to find out why, after all her flattery and protestations of affection for Paula, she has left off coming to Highbridge Hall.'

'No one could answer that question satisfactorily but herself, Mr Rushton. But you know how fickle some people are. How they take a sudden fancy, and as suddenly drop it again.'

'That explanation won't do for me, Mrs Measures. People don't drop their acquaint-

ances without some reason—true or otherwise. Lady Bristowe has not been at our house since last November.'

'Well, you know, Paula refused to see her after her mother's death, and perhaps that offended her. And once a person turns against another, in ever so slight a degree, there are always plenty of mischief-makers ready to creep in and make the breach wider.'

'You mean that she has listened to the Deepdale scandal, and believes it?'

'I think she has heard something against Paula. I cannot say anything further,' replied Mrs Measures.

'Curse all their venomous tongues!' cried Hal wrathfully.

'Why should you worry yourself about it, Mr Rushton?' said Mrs Measures sweetly. 'Surely you can afford to rise above a village scandal? *You* know what your wife is, and that is sufficient. And just now, when she has given you this sweet baby, and settled down so happily in her comfortable home, is the last moment in

which you should remember a past annoyance. Let it die a natural death. It only requires time to kill it. And, meanwhile, forget it, and enjoy the blessings God has sent you.'

'You are right, Mrs Measures,' replied Hal, as he grasped her proffered hand. 'You are a true, sensible woman, and I am a very foolish young man. I have more happiness in my Paula than I deserve, and sufficient to outweigh a thousand such annoyances as you allude to.'

'That is the right way of looking at it, Mr Rushton, and rest assured you will never lose a friend worthy of the name. My dear husband always speaks of you with affection, and you may depend on me as your wife's true friend as long as my life lasts. I shall call to see her, and my little godchild that is to be, to-morrow without fail.'

This conversation did much towards soothing Hal Rushton's perturbed spirit, and from that evening his domestic peace was restored. It was impossible not to be happy now that the widow's baneful presence was removed from

them. Everybody seemed to feel the benefit of the change. The baby blossomed like a little rosebud under the fostering care of Mrs Roberts, and Paula was soon out of bed and seated in an arm-chair by the open window, enjoying the warm air and sunshine, and growing stronger every day. Mary Measures was her constant companion, and Paula seemed so happy and contented with her that Hal had no hesitation in leaving them together whilst he went about his daily avocations. But his greatest pleasure lay in seeing how completely his wife's low spirits and despondency had fled before her baby's birth. Her grief for her mother's death seemed to have been swallowed up in this new joy, and if she ever thought of Paulie she evinced no sign of it. All her affections and her aspirations appeared to be centred on her husband and her child. She clung about Hal as she had never clung before, and would sit for hours with her infant on her lap, gazing into her unformed features, and speculating on what she would look like when she had grown

to be a woman. Sometimes, either from weakness or depth of feeling, she would sob for a few moments, with her head on her husband's breast, and whisper to him that she was not worthy of so much happiness, and she feared lest Heaven should take it back again. But the next minute she would be smiling, even whilst the tears were standing in her eyes, and calling herself names for being so stupid as to give way. A few more summer suns and she was sitting out upon the lawn, or walking slowly round the garden, leaning on his arm, whilst health and strength returned to her. She was no longer Hal's White Rose in those days. Her slight figure had become plump and developed, and on her usually pale cheeks bloomed a vivid pink colour. He used to joke with her about it, and say she was his cabbage rose, and would be his peony before long. Lying on the grass at Paula's feet, whilst Mary Measures poured out their afternoon tea for them, and Mrs Roberts paced up and down the paths with little Edith in her arms, Hal Rushton used to

think he had reached the ultimatum of human felicity. It did not occur to him any longer that they were always (excepting for the vicar's wife) alone, and that no other friends looked in to congratulate them on the new happiness they had acquired. And if he had remembered the fact, it would not have annoyed him. He disliked society, and found his world within the precincts of his own property. But others were less slow to observe the change and to comment upon it. Meanwhile Paula bloomed and the baby blossomed, and Hal Rushton was content. As soon as it was certain that no permanent harm would accrue to the baby from the narcotic she had swallowed, the true story of the widow's dismissal was related to Paula, and she joined her thanks to those of her husband that the mischief had gone no further. Hal had fulfilled his threat to send in the notice to quit to the tenants of Wavertree Cottage. He was not a man (as Ted Snaley had observed) to say one thing and mean another. He felt he had reached a crisis when no further duty was re-

quired of him respecting his father's widow, and determined to rid himself, root and branch, of the Snaley family. Mrs Rushton, therefore, was compelled, during the next quarter, to give up her occupation of the cottage, whereupon she and her son removed to Haltham, where they occupied two or three rooms over a shell-fish shop in the market place. 'It was so cheerful and lively,' as the widow observed to her Deepdale friends, 'to see the folks coming to market, and to 'ear the 'aggling that went hon, and what with the smell of the veggables and the shell-fish, me and Ted will never miss the country, nor yet the seashore neither.'

Their departure was a great relief to Hal and Paula, who always took good care when driving her little pony chaise into Haltham to avoid the market place lest she should encounter her enemy. But she never met either the mother or her son. From the moment they left Deepdale, they seemed to have dropped out of their lives altogether. And so the months rolled on, until the summer had been succeeded by the

autumn, and the autumn by the winter, and little Edith was a bonny girl of six months old. And still Hal Rushton's domestic peace was undisturbed, and love made a little paradise of Highbridge Hall.

CHAPTER III.

A TERRIBLE DISCOVERY.

THE winter of that year was typical—clear and frosty, without fog or damp, and the young Rushtons almost lived out of doors. Paula, who was stronger and healthier than she had ever been in her life before, had developed, under Hal's instructions, into a good horsewoman, but she was a still more excellent whip. She took the keenest delight in driving, and her husband in his desire to indulge her wishes, bought a match for his mare, and put the pair into a curricule, which Paula used to spin through the village at such a rate as to bring all the gossips to their doors with the gruesome prophecy that she would live to break her neck.

It was a pretty sight to see her, with her fair face flushed with excitement, wrapped up in furs to her chin, and sending her horses at their smartest pace along the crisp highway.

‘With a groom with ’is arms folded stuck up be’ind ’er like a graven image,’ as Mrs Gribble remarked to Mrs Axworthy. ‘It’s redikerlous, in my opinion, not to say wicked, to keep a human creetur in sich a hattitooode. And did you see her furs, Mrs Axworthy, ma’am? Rooshian sables, Mrs Roberts says they hare, and it’s sinful to see ’em on sich a person. For what *is* she, ma’am, but a school teacher, when all’s said and done. Mr ’Al Rushton he may have married ’er, but that can’t hun-make ’er what she his. And I wonder ’ow long it would be before he’d give our dear good Miss Brown so much as a silk ’ankercher for her throat.’

‘It would be well if she was nothink but a school teacher, Mrs Gribble,’ replied her crony; ‘but there’s wuss be’ind, you may depend on it. I shouldn’t be surprised to ’ear as she’d

been used to this sort of grander before. Folks don't learn to 'andle the ribbins (as my good gentleman calls it) in a minute. But 'ow could she 'ave come by 'em, Mrs Gribble, ma'am? *That's* the 'orrible thought to wrestle with.'

But whilst they wrestled with it Mrs Hal Rushton spun her bays along gaily, and with not a little innocent triumph that she had out-lived all the ill-natured things that had been said of her, and risen to be one of the most important residents and property owners in Deepdale.

'Paula,' said Hal one hunting morning, as he stood before her in pink and top-boots, 'what are you going to do to-day?'

'Nothing particular, darling,' she answered, as she held up the baby to play with his buttons. 'Why do you ask?'

'Because, if you wouldn't mind driving into Haltham, I particularly want to know if Ellis has received those patent snaffles from London. It is more than a fortnight since I ordered them, and I have written to him twice without receiving

an answer. If it hadn't been a hunting day, I should have ridden in myself.'

'Of course I will go, Hal, and if he hasn't got them yet, what then?'

'Tell him not to trouble further. I will write to the manufacturers myself. I never saw such a slow place as Haltham. You have to wait a twelvemonth for everything.'

'They are all asleep,' laughed Paula. 'Oh, baby, you mustn't pull your daddy's hair. That hurts.'

'Bless her little fists!' said Hal, as he disentangled his dark locks from the chubby hands. 'She has inherited the power of drawing from her mother.'

'*I* can't draw,' cried Paula, pretending to misunderstand him.

'*Can't* you. Who was it drew me, then from the farm down to the schoolhouse, night after night, if only to see her shadow on the blind; drew me to church on hot Sundays in summer, and cold Sundays in winter, to watch her face bent down upon her prayer book; drew me, in

fact, until there was no further space to draw me over, because I was in her arms for ever and ever?’

‘It was not *I* who drew you,’ she whispered, with her face against his. ‘It was your own good heart that impelled you to come.’

‘Well, anyway, I am very much here, am I not? And my dear girl is happy to have me?’

‘Happier than she ever conceived it possible she could be.’

‘God bless you both!’ said Hal, as he kissed the mother and the child. ‘But I have no more time for “spooning.” Take your little brat away, Paula—and don’t forget my commission.’

‘No, indeed. I will drive into Haltham directly after luncheon.’

‘And have luncheon early, dear. Don’t be out after dusk, if you can help it. I am always nervous when you drive with lamps.’

‘What, along a straight road as smooth as a bowling alley. What an insult to my skill as a whip. But I will be home by daylight, Hal, I promise you.’

‘Thanks, darling. Well, I must be off. Once more, good-bye.’

His wife accompanied him to the hall door, and held the baby up to see her daddy mount his hunter and ride down the drive. And then, after some excellent fooling with her bantling, she dismissed her for her morning walk, and went singing about the house herself like a bird. She felt unusually happy that day. The fresh, exhilarating air was enough in itself to raise her spirits. Then she had perfect health, and her husband’s love and confidence, and what could any woman desire more? She could not help, as she went about her household avocations, contrasting her present lot with her former one, of which she could not think, even now, without a shudder. How helpless, how hopeless, how despairing she was then. And now, how warmly sheltered by Hal’s protection, how full of hope for little Edith, and themselves how surrounded by love and luxury and comfort. How thankful she should be—nay, she *was*—for the mar-

vellous change. If a close observer had detected at this moment a little quiver of Paula Rushton's lip, it was dedicated, not to the past or future, not even to a thought of her dead mother, but to the uncertain fate of her hapless first-born. That was the only ruffle on the quiet waters of her life—the remembrance of Paulie. Often as she caressed her plump, healthy baby, and watched the intelligence which was so rapidly developing itself in her bright little face, the mournful eyes and vacant, pathetic smile of the child for whom she had cared so little would rise up reproachfully before her mental vision, and force her to swallow down something very like a sob. But she never spoke of it to Hal, and he believed she had forgotten or become reconciled to the loss of the imbecile child. For her own part, she tried hard to believe that he was safe in Heaven, with her dear mother, who had loved him so tenderly, but she never alluded to the subject in any way. She had not forgotten the compact she had entered into with Hal before their marriage,

that the past was to be past and dead for both of them, and not permitted to rise from its unholy grave to disturb their new-born happiness. So she thrust the faint, momentary thought of Paulie resolutely away, and went to the piano and sang a merry song to drown it.

She took her midday meal early, as she had promised her husband, and by one o'clock she was driving in her usually rapid manner, which Hal applauded and Deepdale glared at, along the highroad to Haltham. It was not market day, but the town was rather full, and the saddler's shop stood in the busiest part of it. Paula was proceeding in that direction, guiding her spirited bays very skilfully in and out of the vegetable barrows and donkey carts that blocked the way, when an itinerant musician (save the mark), with a cornopean wretchedly out of tune, commenced to blow a discordant blast which he intended for 'Annie Laurie.' At the same time a crowd of urchins were following and hooting at a shabbily dressed man, apparently not too sober, who stumbled in front

of them over the stony road, muttering to himself, and occasionally distributing a curse for the benefit of his young tormentors. Hal's old mare was well trained and steady enough, but her pole companion was new to harness as well as cornopeans, and with a frightened rear made a sudden start forward, dragging the other with her. Paula could have quieted them if left to herself, but the wretched urchins on either side, perceiving the chance of a commotion, yelled to alarm the horses still more, and for a moment they were beyond her control. In that moment the slouching figure of the intoxicated man, who had not had the sense to step aside, fell down in the middle of the road, and the off mare touched him with her hoof. Paula pulled the pair back on their haunches to prevent further mischief, and her groom was at their heads in a moment, but the figure of the fallen man remained motionless, and the yelling urchins called out, 'You've been and killed 'im, missus.' Paula turned sick with fright. She knew the accident had happened by no fault of hers, but it was

terrible to think she had been the cause of it. Quite a crowd had assembled by this time—a policeman among the number—and descending from her seat, Paula ordered the groom to back the carriage out of the way whilst she ascertained what injury had been done.

‘Is he much hurt?’ she inquired anxiously of the police officer.

The man turned the prostrate figure about with one hand, and then let it drop again. It appeared to be that of a beggar or tramp. The clothes were ragged and dirty, coated with clay and other earths, as though the wearer was used to sleep out at nights, and the torn hat, which had tumbled off when he fell, revealed a thick head of yellow hair, the face being downwards and hidden from view.

‘I don’t think so, ma’am,’ replied the official. ‘The ’orse’s ’oof may have touched ’im, but he fell first. He’s more drunk, to my mind, than ’urt. I’d better take ’im to the lock-up, and then we can see what’s the matter with ’im.’

‘Oh, no!’ exclaimed Paula; ‘he must not go

to the lock-up. I am very much afraid it was my fault, and I will pay for medical assistance for him. Where shall we take him, policeman? Who is the nearest doctor?’

‘Well, Dr Brown’s surgery is just round the corner, but he won’t thank me for taking a drunken man there. There’s no blood, you see, ma’am, nor nothing.’

‘But he may be bruised. I am sure the horse struck him. Speak to him, policeman, and see if he can understand you.’

‘Here you, mister,’ commenced the official, as he touched the arm of the prostrate figure, ‘can’t you get up and shake yourself? You’re not hurt, you know. Come, now, let’s see if you can’t stand.’

He pulled him roughly by the arm as he spoke, and the man rose to a sitting posture and then fell back again, with his face upturned to the sky. Paula, who had been watching the proceedings with the deepest interest, glanced at the features thus revealed to the public, and gave a sharp cry.

‘There’s no cause to be afeard, ma’am,’ said the policeman consolingly. ‘’E’s too drunk to touch you. But ’ere’s the doctor coming. Stand back, you boys, will you, and let the gentleman pass.’

Someone in the crowd had run unasked to inform Dr Brown of the accident, and he now appeared upon the scene.

‘Dead! dead!’ he exclaimed quickly, as he examined the prostrate man. ‘Not a bit of it. Dead drunk, you mean. This seems more in *your* line, Jones, than mine. Run over, do you say? Well, he may have a bruise or two to-morrow, but he’s too full of liquor to have sustained much hurt. Wheels would roll over him as they would over a bladder of water. Is this the lady who drove the carriage?’

He turned to Paula as he spoke, and was startled by her appearance. Her eyes, which seemed fixed in her head, were staring at the vagrant’s face, her countenance was the colour of death, and her limbs were twitching involuntarily. Dr Brown believed her condition to be the effect of fear.

‘You mustn’t take it like this, madam,’ he said; ‘there is no real harm done, and if there were, it is by no fault of yours. The man was too drunk to keep his feet. Why, *you* look in more need of my services than he does.’

‘Who—who is he?’ she asked in a low husky voice, that seemed to have the greatest difficulty in issuing from her dry, parched lips.

‘*Who is he?* I don’t fancy anybody can tell you that. A tramp, most likely, and evidently a disreputable one. Does anyone know him in the town?’ continued the doctor, addressing the gaping audience.

‘’E lodges with Mother Sims,’ replied a squeaky voice.

‘Yes, sir,’ chimed in a dozen others; ‘’is name is Bonson, and ’e lives in Sims’ hattic.’

‘Let him be taken home, then,’ said Dr Brown, ‘and I’ll attend him there. Jones, fetch a stretcher, and have him removed at once. This lady requires my attention the more of the two.’

Paula shook her head silently, and with a face white as death, and trembling fingers, extracted a couple of pounds from her purse and pressed them into the doctor's hands.

‘My dear lady—Mrs Rushton of Highbridge Hall, if I am not mistaken—’ She moved her head mechanically. ‘This is far too much. You exaggerate the injury, I assure you. The man will be quite well by to-morrow.’

‘Please—take—it,’ she said, with an effort, and looking as if she were about to swoon. But he still refused to accept it.

At the sound of her voice, low as she had spoken, the vagrant on the ground rolled his head round and regarded her, and their eyes met. Paula said nothing, but leaning up against the little doctor, fainted away in his arms.

‘There, now,’ he exclaimed fussily, ‘didn’t I tell you this lady was alarming herself unnecessarily. Look at this. Who will help me to carry her to my surgery? Here, my man!’ he continued, addressing the groom. ‘Bring the carriage round the corner, and as soon as your

mistress is recovered, you must drive her home. Here's a pretty bit of business about a drunken tramp,' he ended with, as he and another man carried the unconscious Paula to his consulting room. As they passed him, the vagrant raised himself on his elbow and looked after them.

'Aye, there she goes,' he cried, 'with her carriage and horses, whilst I lie upon the ground, and may rot here for aught *she* cares. Curse her!'

'Come, now,' said the policeman, 'stop that. The lady's been a deal too good to you. You would have been in the lock-up by this time but for 'er. Them 'orses' 'oofs never touched yer. Get up, and go to your home. D'ye hear?'

'*My home!*' repeated the man bitterly. 'If I had my rights, my home would be with her.'

'Why, you're drunker than I thought you were,' said the policeman. 'If you speaks another word like that I'll run you in. Get up, I say.'

Do you mean to lie here till another vehicle drives over you?’

At this hint the vagrant rose to his feet, and having made a pretence of dusting his tattered coat, shambled off the highway into a by-street, where he disappeared.

Meanwhile Paula, coming to herself in the little doctor’s surgery, gazed vacantly at the cane benches and white-washed walls.

‘You’re better now,’ said Dr Brown, as he held a glass to her lips. ‘Drink this and you will soon be yourself again.’

But Paula pushed the cordial from her, and staggering to her feet, exclaimed,—

‘Let me go home.’

‘Of course you shall, directly you are able to do so. Your carriage is waiting at the door. But let me entreat you to drink this first. Your nerves are shaken, Mrs Rushton. That drunken brute frightened you, and you are not fit to take so long a drive without a stimulant.’

She drank the draught, as he desired her, conscious that to continue to refuse it was to

delay her return to Deepdale. But as soon as it was down she turned an ashen face to Dr Brown, and repeated,—

‘My carriage, please. I wish to go home.’

‘To be sure,’ replied the doctor cheerily; ‘but you mustn’t attempt to drive yourself, Mrs Rushton. Take your mistress back very carefully, Green, and she’ll be all right by the time she reaches Deepdale.’

And then he assisted Paula into the curricule, where she lay back against the cushions, with half-closed eyes, and in a few minutes was out of sight.

‘Strange,’ thought the little doctor, as he looked after her. ‘I’ve always heard her spoken of as such a brave and dependable woman, but she doesn’t seem to be much more use in an emergency than the generality of her sex. A great deal of good sympathy wasted on a worthless vagabond.’ And with that he dismissed the subject from his mind.

It was not the groom’s business to watch the features or actions of his mistress, and

indeed it was as much as he could do to keep the two ruffled mares in hand on their way home. But had he looked at her he would have seen that Paula never altered her position, nor moved her eyes, until he drew rein at the front door of Highbridge Hall. Then she stumbled to the ground somehow, and felt her way, almost blindly, to her own room. The afternoon was still at its height, the hour being four, but there was a bright fire burning in her grate, before which was spread a snowy sheepskin rug. Paula closed the door and locked it, almost mechanically, and then, having torn off her furred mantle and hat, she flung herself down, in a position of the utmost abandonment, upon the sheepskin rug, with both her hands pressed tightly against her temples. Even as she lay there the room seemed to go round and round with her, the floor to shake and tremble beneath her weight, the air to be full of buzzing, whirring noises that made thought almost an impossibility. What was it that her mother had told

her when she returned from the journey to London, which she undertook solely to satisfy her daughter's anxious fear? That Carl Bjornsën had died in the Paddington workhouse, from drink and disease, and that she was freed from him by God as well as man—free to become Hal Rushton's wife, and to look him in the face and say truly that her first husband was dead, and could never trouble either of them again. And to-day she had seen Carl Bjornsën in the streets of Haltham, drunk, but living, tattered, dirty and disreputable, yet living—a jibe for boys, a case for the police, a wretched waif of humanity, apparently both friendless and homeless, but still living, living, *living*—to curse and kill her new-found happiness.

She had no doubt whatever that it was he; that the degraded being her horses had nearly run over was the blue-eyed, flaxen-haired Carl Bjornsën she had once believed she loved. The sight of his thick crop of yellow hair had given her a shock even before she had seen his coun-

tenance (it had so painfully reminded her of that of the Swede); but when she had looked at his face, and their eyes had met, although his features were bloated by vice and distorted by passion at the sight of her, she had recognised him at once as the husband whom she believed to be lying in his grave. Everybody had misled her, then. Seth Brunt, when he assured her his captain was dying, and her poor dear mother, when she accepted the landlady's assurance that her lodger had breathed his last in the workhouse. They had not meant to deceive her, perhaps (her mother assuredly not), but the terrible upshot was the same. Carl Bjornsén lived, and had followed her to Haltham. But for what purpose? Did he intend to make his way to Deepdale—to insult her, perhaps, before her servants—to expose her secret to their neighbours, to confront her in the very presence of her beloved husband, who had felt the mere fact of his having existed so keenly as to extract an oath from her never to mention it in his hearing again? Oh, no, no. At whatever risk, Paula felt, she must keep this awful

discovery from Hal, or all their happiness might be wrecked with the knowledge of it. If she could only meet Carl Bjornsén face to face, and learn his intentions, and bribe him with money to go away, and to keep away, their future peace might be secured. For a few moments she thought of telling everything to Hal, who was so good and kind to her, and had it not been for his exaggerated horror of divorce she would have done so. But he did not believe in divorce. He had often told her that if a marriage under such circumstances was legalised by man, it was not blest by Heaven. He was a simple-minded, country-bred gentleman, far behind all the fashionable foibles of the day, but such were his opinions, and his wife shuddered as she recalled them. At all costs, she decided in a bewildered manner, Hal must not hear the truth unless it became absolutely necessary. But oh, how wretched that single interview had made her. It seemed to have cast a gloom over her whole life. Nothing *really* was altered. Nothing *could* be altered, and she was quite innocent of having attempted to

deceive her husband, yet, as she lay face downwards on the rug, Paula felt as though she were the guiltiest creature upon earth. At last the sound of the hall clock striking six made her remember that Hal would soon be home from his sport, and demanding to see her. She rose hastily, and approaching the glass, was frightened at the sight of her white face and swollen eyelids. How could she disguise the effects of the emotion she had passed through? What should she say if Hal observed it? In another moment she had plunged her face into a basin of cold water, and was trying, though ineffectually, to remove the traces of her indisposition and her tears. Her husband knocked at the door for admittance in the very midst of it, and she had no excuse to deny his entrance. In he came, laughing and happy as usual, with the fresh colour in his face heightened by air and exercise, looking just what he was, a specimen of a young and healthy Englishman, and stood before her fire warming his hands, whilst she hid her face somewhat with her towel.

‘Well, my darling,’ he began briskly, ‘we have had a glorious run, after all. Those few drops of rain last night freshened up the scent considerably, and made it quite easy going. Did you enjoy your drive? What did Ellis say about the snaffles?’

Paula lowered the towel in her surprise.

‘*Ellis!* Oh, Hal, what will you say to me? I forgot all about him.’

‘Forgot *Ellis*. You *are* a trustworthy messenger. What else did you go to Haltham for?’

‘It *was* stupid of me. But the new mare gave me a little trouble as we got opposite the “Fox and Grapes,” and I turned the horses’ heads at once, and drove home as quickly as possible.’

‘What did she do?’

‘A lot of boys began shouting at her, and she grew restive and reared.’

‘Did she frighten you, Paula? What’s the matter with your face?’

He left the fireplace, and walking up to her, examined her swollen features.

‘Why, you’ve been crying, my darling. What is the matter? Has anything annoyed you?’

Paula was going to answer him in the negative when a thought stopped her. The groom, James Green, had witnessed the accident, and seen her faint. He would be sure to speak of it in the kitchen, and it might get round to her husband’s ears. She had better tell him the truth (or part of the truth) at once.

‘Yes, I have been frightened, dear; but I would rather have kept it from you, because you make such a fuss over every little thing that happens to me. A tipsy man fell down in the road, and the horses nearly went over him. It gave me a dreadful turn, and I—I—fainted.’

Hal’s loving arms were instantly folded round her, as though to shield her from further harm.

‘Oh, my darling, why didn’t you tell me this at first? *Fainted!* I didn’t know you *could* faint. Were you in the carriage?’

‘No. I had got out to see if the man was hurt.’

‘And who looked after you? Did you fall in the road?’

Paula felt as if he would draw the whole truth out of her before he had finished.

‘Please don’t make a fuss about it,’ she said impatiently; ‘it was of no consequence. I was afraid I had run over the man, and it gave me a shock. Someone took me in somewhere and gave me a glass of water, and I was all right in a minute or two, and then Green drove me home. I shouldn’t have told you if you hadn’t seen my face.’

‘I should have thought it very strange if you had *not* told me, Paula. It is so unusual for you to show the white feather. Was the man hurt?’

‘Oh, no. He was only intoxicated, the policeman said, and the horses had not touched him. When I heard that, of course I was all right. But tell me about the meet, Hal. Who was there?’

‘Oh, the usual set. Mrs Simpson was out with us, looking a regular guy. That woman

must weigh fifteen stone. I pity her horse. I wonder if the policeman was correct about that man? It would be very shocking if you had really hurt him. It would be our duty to make him some recompense.'

Paula tapped her foot fretfully upon the floor.

'Didn't I tell you he wasn't hurt, Hal? I know what you're thinking about—that I have been driving too fast; but Green said it was a wonder I didn't go right over him, and that, if I hadn't pulled up the horses as promptly as I did, I must have done so. He was lying right in the road.'

'I am very thankful you *did* pull up so quickly. Was he a Haltham man?'

'No, no; a common tramp, with ragged clothes. Don't talk of him any more, please. I'd rather forget all about it?'

'It has excited you more than you like to acknowledge, little woman,' replied Hal, as he sauntered out of the room to change his dress.

As he disappeared, Paula threw herself into an arm-chair. What had she said? How much had she acknowledged? How far had she betrayed herself?

Her head was going round and round, and the faces of Carl Bjornsën and Hal Rushton were revolving before her sight like the colours in a kaleidoscope. Her old life and her new life seemed to be mingling into one, until she hardly felt sure to which she belonged. The sight of Carl Bjornsën had revived the past even whilst the voice of Hal Rushton assured her of the present. She could neither reason with herself, nor decide what was best to be done—she was only sure of this, that she must carefully and calmly think over the best plan to get rid of Carl Bjornsën. How she hated the man at that moment: the inhuman wretch who had blighted her former life, and now had risen from the dead (as it seemed to her) to torture her present. Had he stood before her at that moment, and she had held a knife in her hand, she would have been quite capable of running

it into him. She *hated* him, she repeated to herself, with clenched teeth—she hated and despised him. If he attempted to come between her and her Hal, if by persecutions or annoyances he wrested from her but one tithe of her darling's love or confidence, she would poison him like some venomous animal whom it was quite justifiable to put out of the way.

The meek girl, who had submitted to such outrageous tyranny in the days gone by, and was now the most ductile and loving woman in creation, seemed suddenly to have been transformed into a fury, thirsting for revenge.

But her righteous anger was a very poor imitation of the passion of the gods. It was the stamping hoof of the incensed ewe trying to defend her lamb—the peck of the turtle-dove as the hand of the spoiler robs her of her eggs.

A knock for admittance at her bedroom door was followed by the entrance of the

nurse, with the cooing infant in her arms, and in a few moments Paula had washed away all her angry feelings in a burst of tears over her baby girl.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FATE OF PAULIE.

IT is a curious fact that when Paula's mind had recovered the first stunning shock of encountering Carl Bjornsën she began to try and persuade herself that she had been mistaken, that the vagrant in Haltham High Street had only borne a remarkable resemblance to her late husband, and that her nerves were in such an excited condition after the accident that she had exaggerated a passing likeness into a reality. All that night she lay awake upon her bed thinking over the assurances she had received of his death, and the improbability of their being untrue, until she had almost persuaded herself she was alarmed without cause.

It was a fact that the tramp was very like Carl Bjornsën, but then he might be a Swede, and she knew from experience how much the men of that nation resemble each other. She fancied his eyes had lighted on her with a malevolent glance, but the man was intoxicated, and, doubtless, felt vicious at having been so nearly run over. How *could* he be Carl Bjornsën, she questioned herself pitifully, when he had died in the workhouse at Paddington? She went over Seth Brunt's information, and her mother's undoubted assurance, again and again, until she had decided that she had been frightened by a chimera, and she had only to look upon the man again to be convinced she was mistaken. By the morning she had come to the resolution that she would do so. She could not live a life of doubt and uncertainty. It would poison her whole existence. She would know the best or the worst before another night came round. When she rose, she was naturally looking pale and haggard. She was the sort of woman who loses all her delicate bloom from the want of

one night's sleep. Hal was concerned at her appearance, and wanted her to stay at home and rest, whilst she was madly impatient to be free from his scrutiny, and able to follow out her plan.

‘I shall not let you drive the new mare again, darling, until I have tried my persuasive powers over her,’ he said at breakfast. ‘I shall ride her round the farm to-day, and take her for a good bucketing over the hills afterwards. That will teach her not to rear at everything. And you had better stay at home, or go for a little walk. You are looking ghastly pale still. I don’t like to see my pink rose turned into a white one again.’

His wife did not know what to answer him. She intended to go into Haltham that afternoon, but she dared not hint at such a thing for fear lest he should offer to accompany her.

‘What do you say yourself, Paula? What do you wish to do?’

‘I don’t feel like going out this morning,’ she answered after a while. ‘I would rather you

stayed at home with me (if you don't mind), and took the mare for her bucketing in the afternoon. There are those stable accounts to go through, you know, and you said yesterday you wanted my assistance in writing some business letters.'

'All right, my darling. So let it be. I think, as you forgot all about Ellis yesterday, that we'll write straight to the manufacturers, as I proposed. And Walton must be advised about that cistern leaking. We'll give an hour or two to business, and then you must rest on the sofa till luncheon. I cannot bear to see you look so ill.'

After luncheon he said to her, as his horse was waiting at the door,—

'I suppose you feel hardly equal to riding round the farm with me, Paula? The fresh air would do you good.'

He saw her colour as she replied,—

'No, thank you, Hal. I have a dozen things to attend to yet. I should only keep you waiting, and I would prefer a walk.'

‘Don’t go too far and overtire yourself.’

‘Oh, dear, no! I may walk round to see Mary; she has a coral necklace for Edie.’

‘Very well, my dearest. Only, take care of yourself,’ he replied, as he kissed and left her.

As soon as he was fairly gone, Paula ordered the pony chaise to be made ready. This was a little basket-carriage that only held two people, and was drawn by a fat little animal called ‘Tubby,’ who went at the rate of about four miles an hour. When it came round, she desired her nurse to accompany her with little Edith. She was determined not to have another eye-witness of her doings. She started as though for an hour’s drive along the highroad, but as she reached the outskirts of the village she said suddenly,—

‘By-the-way, Maria, I never got any rusks for baby in Haltham yesterday. We must be nearly out of them. I think I had better drop you here, and you can walk home with her, and I will go and get them. It will

never do to run short. Poor baby would be starved.'

'I don't think there's any hurry, ma'am,' replied Maria; 'she must have enough to last her for some days.'

'But we can't risk it. Suppose anything were to happen to prevent our sending over. I could not be easy if they were not in the house, when the child lives on nothing else.'

'Mr Gribble's cart goes in most every day,' suggested the nurse, with a view to solving the problem.

'Oh, nonsense, as if I would trust to that man. He would bring us Abernethys, or Thorley's Food for Cattle, or something equally appropriate. Get down, Maria, and take baby home. You might call in at the vicarage on your way. Mrs Measures was complaining the other day how seldom she saw her godchild.'

'Very good, ma'am,' replied the servant, who was rather disappointed, nevertheless, at losing the promised drive.

As soon as she had disposed of her com-

panions, Paula turned all her attention to persuading 'Tubby' to step out a little more briskly than usual on his way to Haltham. Her heart was beating fast under the doubt whether she would be able to accomplish her design, and what awaited her if she did so, and a dozen times she felt as if she must get out of the pony chaise and run into the town, so soberly and unconcernedly did 'Tubby' go upon his way. The application of the whip, however smart, seemed to make no impression on him. He only shook his fat sides, as if a fly had tickled him, but did not quicken his footsteps for a moment. Haltham lay seven miles from Deepdale. Would she ever get there and back before dark was Paula's despairing thought. At last, however, by dint of whipping, chirruping, and jerking the reins, 'Tubby' managed to crawl into the town about a hour and a half after she had started, and Paula breathed quickly as she felt her time for action had arrived. She was particularly anxious not to encounter Dr Brown, or the policeman Jones, and yet she

did not know how she should find where the vagrant lived without the help of either of them.

‘In mother Sims’ attic,’ some lad had shouted out that the man resided.

‘*Mother Sims.*’ There might be dozens of Mother Sims in Haltham. Who would direct her to the right one? She drove her pony chaise round to an obscure inn in the empty market-place where she often put up when in Haltham—the ‘Black Horse’—the landlady of which knew her well.

‘Well, here’s a surprise, to see you again so soon,’ she exclaimed, as Paula descended and the ostler led the pony away. ‘We ’eard you was in Altham yesterday, and had a sad haccident, but no ’arm done, thank the Lord, though you was a bit shook, doubtless, ma’am?’

‘Oh, no! Only a little frightened,’ replied Paula, as she followed the landlady into the little parlour.

Here, she thought, might be an opportunity to

ascertain the address she was looking for. She must ask *somebody*, she argued, why not Mrs Spriggins as well as another?

‘I’m glad it was no wuss, ma’am,’ continued the woman; ‘but them ’orses of yours are very spirity.’

‘Not at all, as a rule, Mrs Spriggins. It was the boys shouting and a man playing the cornopean that frightened them. But I’m afraid the poor tipsy man must have been bruised. Have you heard anything about him?’

‘Not a word, ma’am, so I don’t think he can have come to no ’arm.’

‘One of the lads said he was lodging at Mother Sims’. Do you know where she lives, Mrs Spriggins?’

‘No, I don’t, ma’am, unless it’s up Blind Alley, across the market - place. There *is* a Sims there, I know; but there are several of the name in ’Altham.’

‘I suppose so. But Mr Rushton thinks it only right that we should make the man some compensation in money, which I was

too flurried to think of yesterday. So I am trying to find him out to-day. I have to get some rusks for my baby at Moon's, and I will make a few inquiries at the same time. Good afternoen, Mrs Spriggins. I shall require the chaise about five.'

'The doctor could tell you 'is address, ma'am,' screamed the landlady after her, as she descended the steps, 'for my Joe told me as 'e'd been good enough to attend the man at 'is own 'ouse.'

Paula felt her cheeks burn as she hurried across the market-place. What had the 'man' told the doctor? How much might not be known in Haltham of her former history at that very moment? She drew down her spotted net veil closely over her hat, as though that could hide her agitated features, and walked rapidly over the narrow sidepath until she had reached Blind Alley. Calling a little girl out of the gutter, she gave her a penny to tell her which of the houses belonged to 'Mother Sims,' and was directed

in consequence to the fifth door in the row, which was next to a fish shop, at the upper window of which sat a young man smoking a clay pipe. They were country-built houses, without bells or knockers—only latched doors that opened on to the living room. Paula rapped against Mother Sims' with her knuckles first, and then timidly lifted the latch.

‘Does Mother Sims live here?’ she inquired, in a low voice.

A woman answered to the name.

‘I’m Mrs Sims, mum, if it’s me as you’re hasking for.’

‘Have you a lodger here—a very poor man—a sort of tramp—I don’t know his name—’

‘*Me* keep tramps in *my* ’ouse!’ cried the woman shrilly. ‘I should ’ope not, iudeed. What do you take me for?’

‘I did not mean to offend you, indeed,’ replied Paula earnestly. ‘I am looking for the man. He is an object of charity, and I came to relieve him.’

‘Well, he ain’t ’ere,’ said the woman rudely, as she closed the door again.

Paula stood perplexed on the pathway for a minute, whilst the young man at the window over the fish shop eyed her movements keenly.

‘Mother,’ he said, turning towards someone in the room, ‘I’ll be blowed if there ain’t Mrs ’Al a-talking to the woman next door.’

‘*Mrs ’Al!*’ cried his mother, hurrying to his side and peering over his shoulder. ‘Lor’, Ted, and so it is. Now, what may *she* be wanting in these parts?’

‘Don’t ’ang so far out of the winder or she’ll twig yer,’ said Ted Snaley. ‘It’s ’er, an’ no mistake, and after no good, I’ll warrant. She don’t seem to know what she’d be at. Now she’s acrossing the market-place again.’

‘Ted, my lad, you slip on your coat and foller ’er a a distance like, and find out where she’s agoing. Don’t let ’er catch a sight of you, for the Lord’s sake. And I’ll jest step into Mrs Sims and ’ear what she wanted of ’er. She’s a deep ’un, Ted, you mark my words.’

Meanwhile Paula, baffled in her first attempt to find the man whom she had almost persuaded herself by this time was *not* Carl Bjornsén, had remembered Mrs Spriggins' advice, and was wondering if she could make up her mind to call upon the doctor. After all (she argued), it was the vagrant she was in search of, and it was the most natural thing that she should wish to compensate him for the effects of her careless driving, and no one need know anything more. As she was debating the matter in her mind, she caught sight of Dr Brown's boy, who had helped to attend on her in the surgery, going his rounds, with a basket of medicine on his arm. In a moment she had sprung after and detained him.

'I want you to tell me something, she said, panting. 'You are Dr Brown's errand lad, are you not?'

'Yes, mum,' replied the boy wonderingly.

'I want to know where that man lives that I ran over yesterday. Do you know his address? I hear Dr Brown has attended him.'

‘Yes, mum. I took a bottle of medicine there last night. He lodges at John Sims’, in Barefoot Lane. It’s just round by Saint Mark’s Church, mum—runs alongside it like—and Sims he lives at number fifteen.’

‘Thank you. Can you keep a secret?’

‘Yes, mum.’

‘I am going to give the poor man a little money, but I don’t want all the world to know it. Will you promise me not to tell the doctor, or anyone, that I asked for his address?’

‘Yes, mum,’ repeated the boy, with open eyes.

He opened them still more when the lady in furs and a silk gown put five shillings in his hand before she went on her way. He had never had so much money at one time in his life before, and Paula was out of sight before he had left off gazing at it, whilst Ted Snaley, who had watched the little transaction from the opposite side of the way, followed cautiously in her wake. Haltham considered itself an important town but in reality it was very small, and except on market days very empty. Its

streets were easily traversed, and Paula's light feet had soon found Barefoot Lane, that ran alongside of Saint Mark's Church. She glanced from side to side before she entered it, and then, with a rush, she made for number fifteen and rapped upon the door. This time it was a man who answered her—John Sims himself, just home from work, and sitting down to tea with his wife and family.

‘May I come in?’ said Paula nervously, as she entered the doorway. ‘Are you Mr Sims? I hear you have a lodger here—I don't know his name—a man who met with an accident in the High Street yesterday?’

‘Oh, yes, he's here, worse luck, and I don't know when we'll get rid of 'im,’ replied John Sims surlily. ‘I meant to 'ave given 'im the sack to-day, but the doctor he's forbid it.’

‘Was—was he hurt?’ inquired Paula, with her purse in her hand. ‘I was afraid he might be, and so I wanted—I wished to—’

‘If you're agoing to give 'im money, mum, I should say as you might find them as was

more deservin' of it—'owever, that's no business o' mine,' replied John Sims. 'Do you want to go up to his hattic?'

'Yes—I think so—' stammered Paula. 'I—I—should like to speak to him if I can.'

'Oh, it's heasy enough, mum, if you fancies it,' rejoined the man, moving to the bottom of the stair and bawling out, 'Moosoo! Moosoo Bonson! 'Ere's some 'un as wants to speak with you.'

All the answer that was elicited from the unseen lodger was conveyed by a curse that came echoing down the staircase.

''E's at 'ome, at all events,' remarked John Sims, with a look of disgust, as he resumed his place at the tea-table; 'you can go up when you likes, mum, but all I 'ope is 'e won't insult you.'

'Oh, I am used to it—I am not afraid—I often visit sick people,' replied Paula, with a catching in her breath as she commenced to mount the creaking stairs.

'The name by which Mr Sims had addressed his

lodger, although so uncouthly spoken, roused her worst fears again, and as she climbed to the room which held him she felt as if she were going to her death. It was at the very top of the house—a bare and dirty attic. As soon as she tapped at the door and heard the voice, which replied ‘Come in,’ she knew who she should see when she entered it. Calling all her courage to her assistance, she passed the threshold, and there, lying in bed, with his hollow eyes glaring from beneath his matted yellow hair, she saw—without the shadow of a doubt—*Carl Bjornsén*. Paula had so often assured herself during the last twelve hours that her eyes must have played her false that meeting her former husband thus was almost as great a blow as if she had looked upon him for the first time. But it was the truth, and she was forced to accept it. She staggered back against the white-washed wall, and stood there, with fixed eyes and heaving breast, fighting against an irresistible desire to scream.

Carl Bjornsén, on his part, sat up and stared

at her. His shirt was ragged and dirty, and falling off his naked chest. There were no sheets upon his filthy mattress, but a brown blanket covered the lower part of his body—a most inadequate protection against the cold in a room devoid of fire. The man's whole appearance betokened the utmost poverty and discomfort, and even in the midst of her horror Paula could not help feeling compassion for him.

‘And so—and so,’ at last she panted, ‘it is really *you*?’

‘It is really *me*,’ replied Carl Bjornsën, in the rasping guttural voice that usually accompanies the last stage of consumption. ‘Who else should it be? You thought you had got rid of me for ever, I suppose. You hoped I was dead, and rotting in my grave.’

‘I heard that you were dead. I was told so. Have you been in league with anybody to deceive me?’

‘Not I,’ he rejoined recklessly. ‘What would have been the use of it? You had kicked me

off like a dog. It was nothing to you what became of me, and so I took my own course, and went to the devil.'

'That was not *my* fault,' she answered.

'Not *your* fault! That is what you women always say. We love you, and trust you, and give ourselves up to you, body and soul, and in return you deceive us.'

'I *never* deceived you,' she said proudly.

'Yes, you did. I thought I had married a girl who loved and understood me. But you set yourselves above me and my companions. You despised me for my weakness. You openly showed your disgust at my way of living, when sympathy might have weaned me from it, and in return you made me hate you—*you*, who once I had so much loved.'

'Oh, Carl,' cried Paula, 'I daresay I was wrong. I was so young, and you tried to make me submit to you through violence. I don't want to reproach you with it now, but you know you nearly killed me.'

'I wish I had killed you altogether. You've

killed me, body and soul, by your desertion. If you'd stayed with me, I would have reformed. But so long as you were safe, and living in comfort, what did you care. And now, you've got a fine new husband, with a carriage and horses, and you can run over my dying body as you've run over and crushed my soul.'

'You do me an injustice,' she cried indignantly; 'but you always were unjust. I left you, not for my own sake, but to save the life of my child—the poor infant whom your cruel blows made imbecile. It was for my bodily safety, and his, that you forced me to seek a shelter in the law. You would have ended by hanging for murder if I had not divorced you.'

'And a good job too,' he answered sullenly. 'It would have been a quicker and more painless ending than this. Look at me now. I have nothing. I have lost my ship, my position, my health, my money. I am starving, and all through you.'

'It is not so,' she replied with spirit; 'you

may have lost everything, but it is through your own fault.'

'Well, I am punished for it, as much as even *your* heart could desire,' he replied. 'I am dying, and without the bare necessities of life, whilst you are living in luxury at Highbridge Hall.'

'Who told you of me or my doings? Why did you come here?' she asked.

'Seth Brunt—the only true friend I ever had—saw you at Deepdale last year, and wrote me word of it. I came as soon as I had the money, to appeal to you—to your compassion, if you will—to spare me a few shillings in my need.'

At this her woman's heart melted.

'Oh, Carl, you cannot have thought so badly of me as to imagine I would refuse. Only, it must be on one condition, that you do not disclose our former connection to the people around you.'

'You are ashamed of having been my wife,' he said bitterly.

'I am ashamed that, *having been* your wife, I am so no longer. It is the divorce that

shames me, Carl. I am the wife of a good man, and the mother of his child, and I should bring disgrace on both of them if your identity were known.'

'You have not told the man you call your husband, then?'

'He *is* my husband — by law and love — as sacredly as any man could be, and I *have* told him *everything*. Only, he thinks you dead (as I did), and if he discovered the contrary it might cause great trouble between us, for he does not believe in the morality of divorce.'

'And suppose *I* don't believe in it either,' exclaimed Bjornsën, 'suppose I choose to assert my former claim on you, what then?'

'Then I should put the matter into the hands of the police, and ask my husband to take me away from Deepdale until it was settled. Don't try to threaten me, Carl. You have no hold on me except that which is evoked by the memory of the past.'

'I am not so sure of that,' said Bjornsën, in the hoarse weak voice which was so often

interrupted by coughing. 'You have a child, you say, by this man. Where is your other child—*my* son—whom you stole from me?'

'Poor little Paulie! He is gone,' replied the mother, with quivering lips, 'but his fate is a mystery. We think he was lost over the Grassdene cliffs?'

'Oh, you think *that*, do you? And you mourned his death, of course,' he said sneeringly.

'I did. I *do* mourn it to this day,' replied Paula, with the tears in her eyes.

'Would you be glad to have him back again?'

She hesitated a moment. Would she be glad to receive back the poor imbecile child whose existence had been a trouble to himself and others, and whose presence she could never ask Hal to endure at Highbridge Hall?

'Why ask me such a question?' she returned. 'He is safe in Heaven. Who would wish to draw him thence again?'

'That's all you know about it,' he said. 'Perhaps it's all you care to know about it.'

But you asked me just now why I had come to Haltham. *This* is my reason. Look here.'

And drawing down the dirty blanket, he showed her the face of a child sleeping by his side. She pressed forward, curious and yet incredulous as to what she should see there.

God in Heaven! It was the face of Paulie!

CHAPTER V.

ON THE TRAIL.

AT that sight the stream of pity which had commenced to flow in Paula's heart for the abject and miserable wretch before her dried up, and her eyes blazed with furious indignation. She seized the child in her arms, and retreating with him to the further end of the room, stood like a creature at bay, whilst she hurled a torrent of angry reproaches on Car Bjornsën's head.

‘You wretch! You mean, pitiful wretch! You inhuman brute! Not content with injuring me to that extent that my poor boy was born an idiot, you stoop to steal him from me—me, to whom the law of England as well as the law of God had consigned him. And you killed

my mother by it. Yes, you are a murderer, as well as a drunkard, and I hate and despise you more than I can say.'

'I — killed — your mother?' stammered Carl Bjornsën.

'You did! you did! She was found dead in her chair—dead of heart disease, accelerated by the grief of Paulie's loss. We could not account for it then, but I see it all now. *You* were the supposed tramp that decoyed away the servant Eliza and the child, and I suppose when she had served your purpose you cut her throat and flung her away in a ditch. You are quite as capable of the one deed as the other.'

'No no!' exclaimed the man, in a shaking voice. 'It is untrue. I did not. The girl is safe in a situation in London. She wanted to stay there. It was her own wish.'

'And what did you do it for?' cried Paula angrily. 'What object had you in taking the burden of this poor helpless lamb upon yourself?'

‘What did I do it for?’ he repeated, in a tone of the most hopeless misery. ‘Look at me, and read the answer to the question in my condition. Paula, for the last twelve months I have been starving. I am so ill I cannot work. I have not the strength of that child.’

‘It has been brought on by your own fault. You have drank yourself to this state. You were prosperous and healthy once, but you threw the blessings God gave you into the gutter.’

‘That is true, but so is the other. When I stole the child, it was with the hope he would bring me bread. I heard you had married again—that you were well off and prosperous—and I thought you would pay me for bringing back your child. I didn’t know till I had seen him that he was an idiot.’

‘An idiot for whose idiotcy God will hold you responsible, Carl Bjornsén.’

‘Perhaps. But one of which you were doubtless thankful to be quit.’

‘It is untrue. We have searched for him far

and wide. His uncertain fate has laid like a heavy load upon my heart.'

'You have him back again now, then, and you can take him away with you if you choose.'

'Why did you not bring him to me before?'

'I could not. I have been at death's door for the past six months. I have walked now, by slow stages, all the way from London, and I shall never leave this town. He and I have starved together.'

Paula glanced at the child, still sleeping in her arms. He was feather-weight, and his body was frightfully attenuated. His little face was shrunk to nothing. The sight of him made her burst into tears.

'Oh, how cruel you have been,' she exclaimed, 'to take him from a safe and happy home, and half kill him like this. My poor little Paulie, who cared for nothing but the birds and flowers. What a life he must have led with you in London. How had you the heart to do it to your own child?'

‘I wanted money. I wanted bread,’ replied Bjornsën hoarsely. ‘If you had ever starved, you would not ask me such a needless question. I thought your mother’s love would have given me a hold over you for the rest of my life. But I couldn’t get at you before, and I have been too ill to write. Indeed, I didn’t know where to write to. I knew Brunt had seen you somewhere near Haltham, and I was just beginning to set my inquiries on foot when your horses knocked me over yesterday.’

‘How long have you been here?’

‘Only a few days.’

‘And how are you living?’

‘*Living!*’ he echoed, glancing round the bare attic. ‘Do you call this living? I haven’t swallowed food for days. The few pence I have gathered tramping have gone in drink, to keep my body and soul together till I met you.’

A vision of what Carl Bjornsën had been when she married him flashed suddenly across

Paula's mind—of the somewhat coarse-featured yet bright and intelligent young Swede, with his blue eyes and his yellow hair, standing on the deck of his own vessel, and looking every inch a sailor—and then she glanced at the unshorn, dirty, emaciated figure on the bed, and burst into a flood of tears, as she pressed little Paulie closely to her breast.

‘Oh, Carl,’ she sobbed, ‘I *am* so sorry for you. It is terrible—terrible to meet you thus. But what I *can* do I will for the old times’ sake.’

‘You had better take the child home,’ he said, in a faint voice. ‘I didn’t tramp with him all this way only to sponge on you. That’s what I *meant* to do, if I’d had the strength, but I’ve broken down now for good, and no money can keep me in the world. And so I wanted to bring Paulie to you, and ask you to take care of him—not for *my* sake, you know, but for the sake of what you once thought me.’

At these words Paula lost her fear of her

former husband, and approached the pallet on which he lay.

‘Carl,’ she said gently, ‘I have not forgotten those days, and I try to think of them as kindly as I can. I have not much money at my own command, but what I have shall be yours. You must move from this wretched room without delay. It is not fit for a—a—gentleman, and I will hire a nurse to look after you.’

‘No good,’ he replied, shaking his head. ‘What nurse would undertake the charge of such a patient? Besides, it will be all over in a few days. The doctor said as much last night. Why, I’ve no lungs left. I coughed them up months ago.’

‘Poor Carl,’ she murmured softly.

‘Only, you take the youngster back with you, and I shall be content,’ he continued. ‘I sha’n’t die easy unless he’s in your hands.’

Paula started. How could she take the boy back to Highbridge Hall without revealing everything? Her heart sunk within her. It was impossible.

‘I cannot take him home with me to-night,’ she answered. ‘I have already told you that Mr Rushton is not aware of your existence.’

‘Tell him of it, then.’

‘I *dare* not. Oh, Carl, have pity on me. He loves me so, and I tremble lest this knowledge should interrupt our peace. It would be impossible to take Paulie to Highbridge Hall without the whole village hearing of it. I must have time to prepare them for seeing him.’

‘And meanwhile he may die,’ said Bjornsén. ‘The doctor said last night it was very doubtful if he would recover, and I can’t attend to him. He’s so weak, he sleeps all day. Some morning I shall find he’s gone to sleep for good. If you want to save his life, take him away.’

‘My poor little child!’ cried Paula, kissing him. ‘I will go and consult Dr Brown on the subject. There is a children’s ward in the hospital. Perhaps they will take him in there.’ She laid Paulie down again by his father’s side, and

taking out her purse, put its contents into Carl Bjornsën's hand. 'As I go downstairs,' she said, 'I will send the woman of the house up to you. Order what you want to make you comfortable—but food, Carl, food, not drink, for Heaven's sake—and I will come and see you again to-morrow. Meanwhile I will see the doctor about Paulie; and if they send for him from the hospital, you will let him go?'

'Anywhere, so we don't see each other die,' replied Bjornsën roughly, as he clutched the money she handed him.

She hardly knew how to take leave of him. There lay the man whom she had married and borne a child to, and yet they were less than nothing to one another. She loved Hal Rush-ton devotedly. She would not have exchanged his affection for that of any man living, and yet it was impossible to forget she had been Carl Bjornsën's wife, and it seemed dreadful to leave him, dying and poverty stricken, without a kindly word. So she laid her hand timidly on his and said,—

‘God bless you, Carl. It pains me more than I can say to see you like this.’

He did not answer her, but turned his face towards the wall, and Paula closed the door and went downstairs with a beating heart. This time she found Mrs Sims alone in the lower room, wondering not a little what kept the lady with her dirty lodger in the attic so long. She went up to her with a crimson face and said,—

‘The poor man upstairs is very ill, I am afraid, and so is the little child.’

‘Yes, ma’am, so Sims says, but I ’ope we’re not going to ’ave a death in the ’ouse. It do go against rooms so.’

‘I am sure they are in great want of food,’ continued Paula, ‘and I have given him a little money to procure it. Will you get him what he may want? Some strong soup—and milk for the child?’

‘And where am I to get soup from at this time of day, ma’am?’ replied Mrs Sims, ‘nor milk heither. Why, the milkman’s been come and gone two hours ago.’

‘Very well. I will send some in. But you can give him some clean sheets and pillow-cases, surely. It must be wretched for him to lie on the ticking.’

‘Oh, I’m quite agreeable if so be as ’e can pay for them,’ replied Mrs Sims, as Paula slipped away.

She had done all she could for the present, but she felt that she must see Dr Brown before she left Haltham. It was a terrible risk, she knew. With a man like Carl Bjornsën, who had drank half his wits away, it was quite impossible to say what disclosures might not be made. Yet still (she said to herself), if all the world were made cognisant of her former relationship to him, she must still do what she was doing if she desired to live the rest of her life in peace, or to die with any hope of mercy. It was now past five o’clock, and the winter’s afternoon was closing in. Few people would have recognised her as she hurried by in her dark clothing. No one *did* recognise her except Ted Snaley, who had skulked about in the shadows for an hour outside the Sims’ house whilst she was engaged with Carl Bjornsën

within, and who started after her as soon as she left it.

Paula found the little doctor in his surgery, having just come in from his parish work.

‘Ah, Mrs Rushton,’ he said, as he recognised her, ‘I hope I see you quite recovered. That drunken fellow has a lot to answer for.’

‘I understand you visited him yesterday, doctor.’

‘And what could I do less, when a certain lady seemed so anxious about him,’ said the gallant Dr Brown; ‘and, indeed, when I saw the state of destitution in which the poor creature lies, I was sorry I had refused the kind gift you offered me for him.’

‘I have just come from him,’ she answered hurriedly, ‘and he has sufficient for his immediate need. But, doctor, the poor little child. What can we do for him?’

Her companion looked grave, and stroked his chin.

‘Ah, yes! It is very sad. It seemed very far gone to me.’

‘But we must save it,’ she cried anxiously. ‘We must take it away at once. It is murder to leave it there. Is there not a children’s ward in the hospital?’

‘But not for aliens, my dear lady. Besides, this is a case of starvation—not of disease. Perhaps the workhouse authorities might be persuaded to take the child in until—’

‘No, no; he shall not go to the workhouse!’ exclaimed Paula, and then seeing Dr Brown look surprised at her vehemence, she added: ‘You see, I feel myself rather responsible in the matter, having knocked over his father yesterday.’

‘My dear lady, you no more knocked him over than I did. However, I don’t want to check your benevolence. I think I know of a woman who will take care of the poor little fellow.’

‘Oh, who is she?’

‘She is the wife of my night-porter and the mother of my errand boy. A most kind-hearted creature, who takes in children occasion-

ally to dry-nurse. Is your mother at home, Sam?’

‘I think so, sir.’

‘Go and tell her to come round to me at once. She lives in the next street,’ he explained to Paula, as the lad disappeared.

‘What do you think of the poor man himself?’ she asked next.

‘Oh, with *him* it’s only a matter of time. He might die to-day, and he may live for a week or two.’

‘No more?’ she exclaimed.

‘Certainly no more, and I doubt if so much.’

‘Oh, doctor, pray do everything you can to ease his sufferings. I will see that you do not lose by it. It is terrible to see a—a—fellow-creature dying amidst such wretched surroundings. Cannot we move him to more comfortable rooms?’

‘I wouldn’t attempt it, madam. Yesterday was his last day out. I found a visible decrease of strength in him last night, and I don’t

think he could stand the exertion of a removal. He would probably die by the way. The only thing to be done for him now is to see he has what he requires till the change comes.'

'I—I—suppose he was tipsy when he fell down yesterday, Dr Brown?'

'I have no doubt of it, and also that a very small amount of liquor would have an effect upon him. The poor fellow is in the very last stage of consumption, induced by his excesses. His body is quite worn out. Nothing could save him now. And he is still young, and must have been good-looking at some time. What a pity to see a man, who might have had the world before him, deliberately kill himself. And do you know, Mrs Rushton, that from the few words he said to me I fancy he must have seen better days. I mean that he is by birth a gentleman.'

'Oh, no, no!' It is impossible!' she cried quickly. 'And, Dr Brown, these men who habitually drink, their brains break down, and they take such queer fancies in their heads some-

times. You can't believe what they say, can you?'

The doctor was puzzled by his visitor's query, and the anxious way in which she put it, but he answered it just as she wished.

'Why, of course not. I shouldn't dream of taking the word of a man like that. But here is Mrs Wilfred.'

And thereupon there entered to the surgery a plump, rosy-faced woman, to whom the doctor explained the case, asking if she would take charge of the child, and telling her that Mrs Rushton of Highbridge Hall would be answerable for the expense.

'And don't spare it, Mrs Wilfred,' added Paula, rather imprudently; 'give him plenty of new milk, and eggs, and everything that will make him strong. He used—at least Dr Brown says they must have seen better days—and I have no doubt he has been used to everything of the best. Poor wee mite! It will make your heart ache to see him. You can count his bones.'

'I will take every care of him, my lady,' replied

the country woman, with a curtsy, 'and the doctor here knows what I did for Mr William's baby when its poor mother died, and he thought himself there was no hope for it.'

'You are quite right, Mrs Wilfred,' replied the doctor. 'You're an excellent nurse, and if anyone can pull the poor child through, you will. Stay here, and as soon as I've seen this lady to her carriage I will walk round with you to Sims', and you can bring him back. Take a blanket with you, though, for he's none too well clothed for this frosty weather.'

'He must have clothes. I will see about them to-morrow,' said Paula feverishly.

'And now, where is your carriage, Mrs Rushton?'

'I drove the pony chaise to-day, and I left it at the "Black Horse,"' she replied.

'Afraid of running over another tipsy gentleman?' he remarked jauntily, as he stepped to the market-place by her side.

'I fancy Mr Rushton was half afraid of it, Dr Brown, for he is exercising the frisky mare him-

self to-day. I am not quite sure,' continued Paula, 'if he would approve of the visit I have paid this afternoon. He would say I should have left it to you. Will you keep my secret, doctor? It has eased my conscience, and no harm's done.'

'My dear lady, you may depend upon my silence, now and ever,' replied the little man, who was wonderfully attracted by her many charms.

He was rather surprised, all the same, to hear her order Mrs Spriggins of the 'Black Horse' to send up a bowl of her best soup and some calves'-foot jelly to number fifteen Barefoot Lane without delay, and place the dainties to her account. To be benevolent and anxious to repair a supposed injury was one thing, but to purchase expensive soups and jellies for the benefit of a wretched drunken vagrant was another, and as Dr Brown handed Paula into her pony chaise, and received her nervous farewell, he could not help wondering if she were as interested in the fate of all the beggars she encountered.

Meanwhile Ted Snaley, having followed her to the doctor's surgery and the 'Black Horse,' went back to his mother, bursting with the information he had acquired.

'Well, Ted, my boy, said the widow, as he entered the room, 'you've been a tidy time after my lady. You don't mean for to tell me as she 'asn't gone 'ome till now? Why, it's nigh on six o'clock.'

'I've honly just seen 'er drive off,' replied Ted, 'and hif I'm not mistook, hit's the prettiest kettle o' fish as hever *you* see.'

'Lor', Ted, you don't say so!' exclaimed his mother, with joy gleaming in her little green eyes, as she seated herself with her elbows on the table. 'Tell me all about it, there's a good lad. His it a lover?'

'Well, now, don't be in sich a 'urry, and I'll begin from the beginning. There's been a stranger—a kind of shabby gentleman like—lodging with the Sims' in Barefoot Lane for some days past, for Jack Sims 'e's spoke to me about him, but when I 'eard Mrs 'Al asking

for Sims' next door I never thought of them. 'Owever, when I started after 'er, I seen 'er speak to Brown's boy, and then what did she do but set hoff for Barefoot Lane, and sure enough she went into number fifteen.'

'Lor', Ted, whatever for?'

'That's what I determined to find out, so when Jack comes out hafter his tea I gets hall I can from 'im about their lodger. And 'is name's Bonson, and 'e's got a child with him, and Mrs 'Al she'd gone straight hup to 'is bedroom and 'e in bed.'

'My, how undecent!'

'Well, she was there a hower. I waited and waited till I was sick on it. At last my lady come out of the door, talking to Mrs Sims, and I 'eard 'er say as she'd given this Bonson money, and she'd send hup soups and jellies for 'im at once.'

'Ow I do wish 'Al could 'ave 'eard her.'

'He shall 'ear it in good time, never you fear. Well, after that, I follows 'er to Brown's surgery, where, in course, she was shut in, and I couldn't

'ear what they said. But arter a while Sam, the boy, 'e comes out and runs to 'is 'ome in Parton Street, and brings back Mrs Wilfred, 'is mother. By-and-by they hall comes out, and I 'eard the doctor telling Mrs Wilfred that when 'e'd seen Mrs 'Al into her carriage she was to go along of 'im and bring the child back from Barefoot Lane.'

'Lor', Ted, it's the most hinteresting thing I ever 'eard. And what next?'

'Why, Mrs Wilfred and Sam they stayed on the surgery steps, and Dr Brown 'e walked with Mrs 'Al to the "Black 'Orse."'

'Do you think 'e's sweet on 'er, Ted?'

'Don't know, I'm sure, but it looks like it, don't it? He walked as close as 'e could to 'er, *that* I see. And when they got to the 'Black 'Orse," he put her into the shay and wrapped the fur rug round 'er and buttoned hup the apron. Oh, she's a deep 'un, mother. I bet she's got 'alf-a-dozen 'anging to 'er apron-string. And afore she went off she ordered the best soup and jellies as Mrs Spriggins 'ad

got to be sent hup at once to Barefoot Lane. Now, what d'ye make of that?'

'Ted,' replied Mrs Rushton oracularly, 'I've a hinspiration. That there man in Barefoot Lane his the same bearded creetur as was locked up with madam in the school'ouse.'

'Why, now you mention it, 'e 'ave a beard. Jack Sims said so. And 'e's a foreigner too—a moosoo—and talks a kind of broken like.'

'*That's 'im*—that's 'im!' cried the widow, rubbing her rough hands together with malicious delight. 'Mr Gribble said 'e'd a rough sort of voice. And so she's whistled 'im back again. Pretty doings, indeed! And there's a child, too. Ted, you must get a sight of that there child to-morrow, if you dies for it.'

'There's nothing heasier. I'll call at Mrs Wilfred's and ask if she's at liberty to take a nurse child. Sam says she never 'as more than one at a time. Then she'll show me this one, and I'll 'ear the why and the wherefore, and I'm blowed if we don't lay a train as will blow 'Ighbridge 'All up to the skies.'

‘There’s a deal more in it than meets the heye, Ted,’ acquiesced his mother. ‘I’ll take my hoath of that, and ’Al will live to be sorry as ’e hever drove me out of the ’All. ’Ow shall we tell ’im? ’E won’t ’ear nothing against ’er, particular from us.’

‘We’ll ’ave to write it anonymous, and send it ’im through the post. Rouse ’is suspicions, and get ’im to watch ’er, and ’e’ll find it all out for hissself quick enough. Not as I think ’e’ll get rid of ’er for it. She’ll lie to ’im too well for that. But it’ll make ’em both miserable, and ’e’ll never ’ave no trust in ’er again, and that will pay off a part of our debt to ’er—eh, mother?’

‘It’ll pay off a good part, my boy,’ she replied, patting him on the back. ‘A very good part. And when shall we send the letter?’

‘Not till to-morrow. I ’eard ’er say she’d come in to town again to-morrow, and I’ll be on the lookout for ’er, mother, and dog ’er footsteps wherever she goes. We shall be more

sure of it when I've seed it for the second time.'

'Lor', how pleased Mrs Gribble and Mrs Haxworthy will be,' was Mrs Rushton's last remark as they dropped the subject.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WIFE'S DECEPTION.

As Paula found herself on the highroad to Deepdale again, and her hands ceased trembling and her excitement was somewhat calmed, she began to ask herself what she should say to Hal. It was now six o'clock—a most unusual hour for her to be out in at that time of the year, and when she reached home (thanks to 'Tubby's' slow pace) it would be past seven. The long interview with Carl Bjornsén, and the conference with Dr Brown, had taken up much more time than she had anticipated, and her heart sunk at the prospect of the long seven miles before her, and the catechism that awaited her at the end of them. It was true she had the

baby's rusks to produce as a reason for her unexpected journey, but what pretext could she give for having been so long bringing them home? She almost wished (as she thought over her perplexity) that 'Tubby' would tumble down and break his knees, and afford her a good excuse for the delay, but 'Tubby' was far too sensible and steady a beast for that. At one time she had almost made up her mind to take Hal into her confidence, and tell him everything, and it would have been well for them both if she had adhered to the resolution. But the remembrance of his anger at her reticence, when he heard she had been married—of his firm belief that her first husband was dead—of his extracting a solemn promise from her (even under that supposition) never to mention Carl Bjornsén's name before him again—and of the many times since their union that he had expressed his thankfulness that she had been a widow before they met, as he would never have married her under any other circumstances, made her afraid to disclose the truth. How *could* she

go to Hal and say, 'However innocently, I have deceived you. I am not a widow. My divorced husband is alive. He is now in Haltham, dying in dirt and disease, and he has thrown my idiot child once more upon my care?' She could fancy Hal's face as he heard the news: his jealous, passionate face, which would change even at the slightest allusion to the past, and her courage quailed before it. If he heard of this, she felt the very least that he would do would be to order her never to see Carl Bjornsén again, but to leave the brute who had half killed her to the fate that he deserved. After it was all over—she said to herself, shivering, and Dr Brown said it could not be very long—she would make a full confession to her husband. But until then she must succour the unfortunate creature whose last hours seemed to have been cast, as it were, upon her mercy. Yet her heart quaked as she turned 'Tubby's' little obstinate head into the stable yard of Highbridge Hall and James Green came forward to receive him.

‘So the master’s in?’ she tried to say jauntily.

‘In, ma’am,’ replied the groom. ‘He was back three hours ago, and he’s been asking for you everywhere.’

Feeling very guilty, Paula jumped to the ground and ran up to the house.

‘Where is your master?’ she inquired of Lousia, who opened the door.

‘I think master’s gone over to the vicarage to look for you, ma’am,’ was the reply.

‘Hasn’t he had his dinner, then?’

‘Dinner went up at six, as usual, but master sent it down again, and said he’d wait for you. Didn’t you meet him, ma’am?’

‘No. How should I?’ said Paula shortly, as she went up to her room.

The vicarage had been her forlorn hope. She had thought, if she told her husband she had called there, that Mary Measures, however grieved and surprised at the subterfuge, would not have betrayed her, and the forgetfulness of time might have been accounted for. But now

she had positively nothing to fall back upon except the rusks. Her head spun when she thought of it. But she found time before Hal's return to change her dress, and brush out her fair hair, and remove all traces of hurry or alarm from her countenance, and when she heard his footsteps in the hall she ran down to meet him and to be the first to accuse herself.

‘Oh, Hal, dearest, what must you think of me? I am horrified to see the time. I did not think it was nearly so late.’

Hal Rushton was a very jealous man, but not in the least suspicious without a cause, and his sole idea on seeing her was thankfulness that she had come home.

‘My darling,’ he exclaimed as he kissed her, ‘what a fright you have given me. Where have you been, and what has detained you?’

‘Nurse might have told you that I had gone to Haltham to get baby some rusks—you know I can only get them at Moon’s—and it is all the fault of that little beast “Tubby,” who went slower than a donkey.’

‘But why didn’t you tell me this morning that you wanted to go to Haltham to-day? I would have driven you in myself. You must know that the old pony is hardly fit for such a long journey.’

‘I didn’t know this morning that we were out of rusks. However, all’s well that ends well.’

‘I don’t think it *has* ended well,’ replied Hal, rather ruefully. ‘You have given me an awful fright, and I expect the dinner’s spoiled.’

‘Oh, no! Cook is too clever for that. But let us order it up at once, and forget this unfortunate *contre-temps* of mine.’

Hal did as she desired, and until his hunger was appeased he did not revert to the subject of her long absence. But with the wine and walnuts it recurred to his mind.

‘I cannot understand, Paula, how even “Tubby,” with his jog-trot pace, can have taken between five and six hours to get into Haltham and back. Bob told me you started by half-past one.’

‘I didn’t hurry the little brute, and I had been driving nurse and baby about the village for some time before I started. I tried to urge him on at first, but when I found it was no use, I let him go his own pace, and I really thought at one time I had better get out and walk.’

‘It was foolish of you to attempt it at all,’ replied her husband, with more reproach in his voice than he had used before, ‘and please don’t do it again without letting me know. What did you do in Haltham?’

Paula was not used to deceit, and she could not help reddening as she replied,—

‘Nothing, except get the rusks.’

‘Did you wait whilst Moon made them?’

She laughed nervously.

‘I might just as well have done so for the time he kept me.’

‘Did you run over any more tipsy men?’

She blushed still deeper—in fact so deeply that no one could have helped observing it—as she replied,—

‘What nonsense. As if I had an accident every day.’

‘Well, did you hear anything about your injured vagrant?’

She answered in a very low voice, ‘No!’

‘I don’t think the new mare will give you any more trouble. I took her round the farm first, and then gave her an hour’s gallop on the downs. She seemed rather pensive as she turned into her stable. I fancy she’ll think over it to-night, and to-morrow I’ll drive you myself, and see how she goes.’

‘Oh, Hal dear, there is no need. I told you it was not her fault. I am not in the least afraid of her.’

‘I daresay not, my darling, but you are too precious to be allowed to run any risk. Let me see, though. To-morrow is the meet, so I am afraid you’ll have to be satisfied with old “Tubby” again. But, for goodness’ sake, don’t take him into Haltham.’

‘Mayn’t I ride with you to see the hounds throw off, Hal?’

‘Of course, if you wish it. But it will be at ten o’clock, and you don’t generally like to be in the saddle so early. Besides, to tell you the truth, Paula, I particularly want to send Green over to Parton Bridge to-morrow on an errand connected with the farm. But he will be back by twelve, if you will postpone your ride to the afternoon.’

‘But why can’t I ride home that little way without a groom? You are too particular, Hal. The Dashwoods never have a groom behind them.’

‘They are only farmer’s daughters, dear, and there are three of them. And the meet is at Bostock to-morrow, two miles off.’

‘But only country lanes to come back in. Who will see me, Hal? And if I *were* seen, what matter. I am only a farmer’s wife!’

He smiled good-naturedly at the retort.

‘But then, you’re the nicest wife in the county,’ he replied, ‘and I can’t afford to lose you. However, if you will ride the old horse, you shall have your wish, Paula. He will not bring you to any grief.’

But having gained her way, Paula's forced spirits sunk again, and she became suddenly dull and depressed. The thought of Carl Bjornsën breathing out his last in that wretched attic, and of little Paulie lying weak and wasted upon Mrs Wilfred's knee, haunted her all the evening. Nothing but fear had prevented her bringing her child home, and now she despised herself for that fear. Her heart yearned over her firstborn. The love which had sprung up for him when she believed him lost to her for ever suffered no decrease from the knowledge that he lived. On the contrary, she blamed herself, and she blamed the fate that prevented his being by her side, and began to nurse a nervous dread lest she should never see him alive again. And consequent on this feeling there arose almost a distaste to the husband and the home which were the obstacles to stand in the way of her doing her duty. Even little Edith's blooming health seemed a reproach to her when she compared it with Paulie's emaciation, and she put the infant (in whom she had usually so much pride) away

from her, and desired the nurse to take it upstairs again, whilst she sat apart in a dark corner of the low, long parlour, neither reading nor working, but unoccupied and silent.

‘Paula, my dear, are you too tired to give me a song?’ asked Hal presently.

‘Oh, yes, Hal. I couldn’t sing for the world. Pray don’t ask me,’ she replied, in a broken voice.

‘Why, of course not, if it worries you. But aren’t you well?’

‘I have a headache.’

‘It’s that confounded drive that has given it you. Hadn’t you better go to bed? Nothing seems to please you to-night.’

‘You are right, Hal. I am tired, and out of sorts. I will take your hint. Good-night.’

‘Good-night.’

It was seldom he let her leave him without a loving word, or a caress, but something in her demeanour this evening—he could hardly say *what*—repulsed him, and he scarcely looked up from his occupation as she passed him by. She

dragged her limbs wearily up to her own room, and having declined all assistance, undressed herself and went to bed. But she could not sleep. Visions of Carl Bjornsén's haggard and reproachful face—of her little Paulie's wasted form—of the dirt and destitution in which she had found them both, kept on passing through her mind as she gazed with wide-open eyes into the darkness.

‘They may be dying—*dying*—both of them,’ she thought, ‘whilst *I* lie here, chained and incapable of rendering them assistance. Oh, my poor neglected and unloved baby! I must sleep—I *must* sleep, or the thought of you will drive me wild.’

An hour later, Hal Rushton's slight ill-humour having quite evaporated, he joined his wife upstairs, and was surprised to find her still awake.

‘Oh, Paula, this will never do,’ he exclaimed. ‘How are you to be in your saddle by half-past nine to-morrow morning if you cannot sleep to-night? You don't go to Bostock if

you are tired. What on earth is the matter with you?’

‘Nothing—nothing,’ she said impatiently, as she closed her eyes and turned her head the other way, and thought that if anything should occur to prevent her attending the meet there would be no chance of her getting to Haltham on the morrow.

Hal made no further remonstrance, but was soon wrapt in a healthy slumber by her side, and after some hours of self-torture, Paula followed his example. But dreams of the scenes she had passed through pursued her, and she stirred and moaned, and was so uneasy, that after a while she disturbed her husband, who sat up in bed and regarded her. The winter’s dawn was just trying to struggle into light, and he could see how flushed and feverish she appeared as she tossed from side to side of her pillow.

‘What can be the reason of it?’ he thought. ‘I hope she has not caught some nasty fever or other in her ramblings, and is going to be ill.’

But at that moment a muttered word from Paula arrested his attention, and he bent over her and listened.

‘Carl,’ she murmured, ‘*poor* Carl!’

Hal started. He had never heard that name from her lips before, all through their married life. In deference to his wishes, and her plighted word to him, she had never alluded voluntarily to her past; and when on occasions it had been absolutely necessary to mention it, she had invariably called her late husband Captain Bjornsén. Hal did not believe that she ever thought of him by any other name, and was it likely she should be dreaming of her dead enemy with any feeling of sentiment? *Who* could this Carl be? He bent over her again, and touched her slightly with his arm, listening with bated breath to what might follow.

‘Carl,’ she repeated; and then suddenly rousing herself, exclaimed, before she knew where she was, ‘Oh, my heart, my heart!’

‘What’s the matter with your heart?’ said

Hal unsympathetically, as he flounced into his place again, and made her understand, in a bewildered way, that she had committed herself.

‘Have I been talking in my sleep?’ she asked quickly.

‘Yes; and an infernal lot of rubbish. I wish to goodness you’d be quiet, and let a man rest. It’s not five o’clock yet.’

‘Oh, Hal, I am so sorry,’ she exclaimed, trembling to think what she might have uttered to make him speak in so rough a tone.

She stretched out her hand, and laid it timidly on his, but he turned away, shaking it off as he did so, and left her wondering at his unusual manner, but afraid to ask the reason of it.

However, eight o’clock struck at last, and Louisa’s welcome voice was heard outside the door announcing the advent of her hot-water and morning cup of tea, which had never seemed so grateful to her parched lips before. Hal, too, seemed to have forgotten the episode

that had upset him, and kissed her affectionately before he took his departure.

‘Are you sure you are fit to ride to the meet to-day,’ he asked her when they met at breakfast, ‘for you passed a very restless night?’

‘Quite—quite fit, Hal,’ she answered earnestly. ‘Don’t say anything against my going, please, because it will do me good. I know I was restless. I hope I didn’t disturb you,’ she added timidly.

Hal shrugged his shoulders, screwed up his face, and left the room, a proceeding which says more on some occasions than many words. However, he made no further objection to her accompanying him to Bostock, which lay about two miles off, between Deepdale and Haltham; and as soon as breakfast was over they mounted their horses and set off, Hal riding his own hunter, and Paula the old mare, which went as well under saddle as in harness. Green was to take the new one, which with ‘Tubby’ comprised the whole of their stable, to Parton Bridge, so that unless Paula could get to Haltham after she left her husband to follow the hounds there

was no chance of her doing so that day. She fancied that Hal looked at her once or twice rather inquisitively during their ride, but she hoped that it was only because he feared she was not well. She exerted herself, therefore, to laugh and talk with him, but she was a bad actress, and, unlike most bad actresses, she knew when she failed, so that it was a great relief to her when they reached Bostock Hill, and were surrounded by their friends and neighbours.

‘Are you going to honour the Hunt with your company to-day, Mrs Rushton?’ exclaimed Mr Foker, as he approached her.

Paula shook her head, smiling, and Hal answered for her.

‘No; that is the last thing in the world I will let my wife do—until I want to get rid of her altogether. She has only come to see the hounds throw off, and is going to ride home quietly through the lanes afterwards, because she has no groom to attend her to-day.’

‘Then I hope she will allow me to accompany her,’ replied Mr Foker, ‘for I am not going to follow myself this morning. I must give my horse a little rest this week, and shall be most happy to see Mrs Rushton home if she will allow me.’

‘Thank you, I shall be much obliged if you will,’ said Hal. ‘I don’t like her riding alone at all, but to-day it was unavoidable. Paula dear, you will be pleased to have Mr Foker as an escort?’ he continued, addressing his wife.

‘Oh, delighted!’ said Paula, whilst her busy brain began at once to think of some plan by which she might effectually evade the little man’s attentions.

‘Don’t let us stand still,’ she whispered to her husband; ‘it is rather cold. Come round the field with me.’

But as soon as they commenced to move their horses she perceived, to her horror, that Mr Foker moved his too. In a few minutes, however, someone addressed a remark to him which he stopped to answer. Hal

Rushton was for pulling up and waiting for him.

‘But why need we do that?’ said Paula. ‘He bores me. I would much rather be alone with you.’

‘But since he has offered to ride back with you, had we not better keep together?’ suggested Hal.

‘Why should we? Am I not big enough to be seen? The probability is that we shall be the only two people left behind, and I shall have had more than enough of him before we reach Deepdale.’

She inveigled Hal by these means to the opposite side of the field, where their horses were lost (for the time being) amidst a crowd of sportsmen. Lord Warden, who was M.F.H. of the county, was there, with a large number of friends, and Paula knew that Mr Foker would be too modest to shove his horse in amongst them even if he could. Her ruse produced the desired effect. Until the hounds threw off, Hal and she were talking and laughing with numer-

ous acquaintances, and the former forgot all about little Mr Foker and his promised escort. When the view-halloo was at last given, and the hunt fairly started, he had only time to call out, 'Keep a tight hold over her till we're gone' (alluding to the mare), before he had followed them. Now was Paula's chance. Without a thought of her husband's warning, she gave her mare the rein, and galloped the length of the next field after them. Then, pulling up at a gate, she unlatched it, and entered the lane beyond, and stood there, quietly sheltered by the high hedge, until the sportsmen were out of sight; and Mr Foker, supposing that after all pretty Mrs Rushton had changed her mind and followed the hounds, turned his horse's head in the direction of Deepdale alone. What will not a spirited woman do to gain her own way? Paula heaved a sigh of relief as through the leafless hedges she watched him depart, and thought how nearly through his good-natured stupidity he had marred her plans. As soon as the coast was clear she urged her mare

into a smart trot, and arrived with little delay at Haltham. The first place she called at, after leaving her horse at the little inn in the market-place, was the doctor's surgery, which she found crowded with his free patients.

‘You are over early this morning, Mrs Rushton,’ he exclaimed, as he came to the door to receive her.

‘Yes; but I won’t disturb you. I am not coming in,’ she answered. ‘I only want to know Mrs Wilfred’s address, and how the child is.’

She tried to put the question indifferently, but there was a glitter in her eye and a trembling anxiety in her voice which puzzled her hearer.

‘Well, the child is better, I think—decidedly better. A warm bath and plenty of milk have done wonders for him already. You will find him at Mrs Wilfred’s, in Parton Street, and Sam shall go round with you and show you the way.’

‘And—and—the man,’ she said in a low voice.

‘The man is much the same, though (thanks to your benevolence, Mrs Rushton) he has now many comforts around him, and has eaten well. But he is past amendment. Shall I see you again before you leave Haltham?’

‘I think not. I am in a hurry. I cannot wait,’ replied Paula nervously, and she walked away as fast as her habit would permit her.

Sam ran after her to show her his mother’s house, and as soon as she entered it she saw Paulie sitting up in a high chair at the table, eating bread-and-milk. She was about to kiss him when she remembered who he was supposed to be, and restrained herself.

‘Oh, Mrs Wilfred,’ she exclaimed, ‘how is the little boy? I came to inquire.’

‘Well, ma’am, he’s but a poor thing, as you can see for yourself, but I believe he was well-nigh starved to death. I’m afraid to give him anything but bread-and-milk, he eats so ravenous. And *that* neglected, poor lamb! You should

have seen his delight when I gave 'im a warm bath. He cooed like a baby. But he's wrong in 'is poor head, ma'am, as doubtless the doctor have told you.'

'No; the doctor told me nothing except that he was better.'

'There's no doubt of it, I'm afeard. He can only say a few words, and they're not intelligible. He don't seem to know how to talk. But he's a pretty ereetur, and so gentle. Come, Charlie, speak to the lady.'

'His name is Paul,' said the lady, without thinking.

'Lor', ma'am, is it now? I suppose his father told you, and I never thought to ask the doctor. We must call him by it, then. Here, Paul, my dear, do you hear nursie speak to you?'

But the child kept his eyes fixed on his bread-and-milk, and did not take the slightest notice of her.

'Paulie,' said his mother gently.

At that sound something seemed to awake

in the child's feeble memory—some ray of intelligence to strike his dim soul. A plaintive smile played about his little mouth, and fixing his big grey eyes on Paula, he uttered 'Ga—ga ! boo boo—ga !' the syllables by which he used to greet her mother. At the remembrance Paula's soul was smitten to the core, and she burst into a flood of hysterical tears.

'My dear lady, you mustn't take on like this. Think of them at home,' cried the kind-hearted Mrs Wilfred, and the warning had the desired effect.

Paula did 'think of them at home,' and pulled out her handkerchief to dry her eyes.

'It is foolish of me,' she said, 'but it is so very sad. I have a baby of six months old that is more intelligent.'

'And as well it may be, ma'am,' cried the sympathetic Mrs Wilfred, 'and with a lady like yourself for its mother.'

'This little fellow must have clothes,' said Paula presently. 'What is he wearing now?'

'Well, ma'am, those are some that my little

David has outgrown that I made bold to put upon him for the present, for his rags were in such a state I couldn't have them in the house.'

'It was very kind of you, Mrs Wilfred, but as I mean to take care of this poor little creature, you must get some for him. What will he require?'

'Well, ma'am, there'll be shirts, and socks, and shoes, and a couple of suits, and—'

'Yes, yes,' I understand,' said Paula, interrupting her eloquence; 'but how much will they cost?'

She had begun to fear lest the money she had remaining in hand—about seven pounds—would not be sufficient to supply what was needed for Carl Bjornsén's illness. And what would she do if it ran short and she had to apply to her husband?

'Well, ma'am, if they're to be nice serviceable things as will last the child for some time, I should say from two to three pounds, for he must have boots, you see, and—'

‘All right, Mrs Wilfred, let us say three pounds for the present,’ replied Paula, as she produced the money. ‘And now, will you fetch me a glass of water before I go? I am so thirsty.’

‘With pleasure, my lady,’ said the woman, disappearing to draw the water from the well in the back garden.

No sooner was she gone than Paula seized her child in her arms and kissed him passionately.

‘Paulie, Paulie,’ she whispered, ‘you shall not be left to strangers’ care for long. *She* loved you, my poor Paulie. She gave her life for you, and your mother will love and protect you for your own sake and hers. Oh! my poor, poor baby! My poor baby!’

The little child felt the warm bosom against which he was pressed, the warm lips that caressed him, and his stunted nature seemed to expand beneath it.

‘Ma—ma!’ he articulated slowly.

‘He knows me’ thought Paula, with a sudden

joy; 'he will learn to recognise and love me. Oh, thank God! thank God!'

The tears were glistening on her eyelashes as she hastily drank the water that Mrs Wilfred brought her and left the cottage, not daring to trust herself in the presence of her afflicted child any longer.

She had still to visit Carl Bjornsén, and her knees knocked together as she entered Barefoot Lane and asked for admittance at number fifteen. The reception she met with was not encouraging.

'I've come to see Mr Bonson, your lodger,' she said, as Mrs Sims opened the door.

'Be he a relation of yours?' demanded the woman curiously.

Paula was taken aback, and began to stammer.

'*A relation!* No. What makes you think so? A poor beggar like that.'

'Oh! he ain't always been a beggar, my 'usband says, and whether or no, 'e's our lodger, and it ain't usual for ladies to visit single men in their bedrooms.'

Paula trembled with indignation from head to foot.

‘How *dare* you speak to me like that?’ she exclaimed. ‘Do you know who I am? Mrs Rushton of Highbridge Hall. Do you suppose my husband does not know of my visits to this sick man?’

‘I didn’t mean no offence, ma’am,’ said Mrs Sims, who saw she had gone too far, ‘but my ’usband ’e won’t never let *me* go into the lodgers’ bedrooms except to clean them, and ’e said ’e should feel much more comfortable like if Mr Rushton came along of you.’

‘Tell your husband to mind his own business,’ replied Paula loftily, as she passed her to go upstairs. ‘I have a message from Mr Rushton for this man, and I intend to deliver it.’

‘Oh! ’ave your own way, ma’am, in course,’ retorted the wife of Sims; ‘’tain’t no business of *mine* what you do, but people *will* talk, and it ain’t the usual thing for ladies as is ladies to visit single men in their bed-chambers.’

So Paula heard her grumblings grow fainter and fainter from below, as she climbed the creaking staircase, feeling more sick at heart about her errand than she had done before.

CHAPTER VII.

AN ANONYMOUS LETTER.

CARL BJORNSËN was lying on his bed, a little less dirty and dishevelled, perhaps, than the day before, but still haggard and unshorn, and with a sullen look upon his dying face. The room, moreover, smelt strongly of brandy.

‘Oh!’ cried Paula, as she involuntarily shrunk backward, with a gesture of disgust, ‘you have been drinking. You have broken your promise to me. You will kill yourself before your time.’

‘*Before my time,*’ he answered moodily, ‘as if my time wasn’t close at hand, and a bottle of brandy or two would make much difference to

it. And what else did you suppose I should do with your money—the money you dole out to me as if I were a beggar, whilst you drive backwards and forwards to see me in your carriage, or come on horseback: Curse you!’

His bitter words roused her spirit.

‘If this is your gratitude,’ she cried, ‘I will not come again. I have run a great risk in visiting you simply because I thought it was my duty. But there can be no duty owing to a man who knows no better than to bite the hand that feeds him.’

She turned away, and was about to descend the stairs, when she heard the rasping guttural voice call after her.

‘Paula! Paula! Don’t leave me. I am dying here alone.’

Of course she went back to him then. No woman with a heart in her bosom could have done otherwise. But she did not approach the bed. Bjornsén had flung himself, face downwards, on his pillows, in an attitude of despair, but to have touched or caressed him would

have seemed like an infidelity on her part to Hal.

‘Oh, Carl,’ she exclaimed, ‘why are you so ungenerous? Is it *my* fault that my husband is good to me? Am I to suffer all my life because your cruelty spoilt the best part of it?’

‘But I lie here and think of it till it would drive me mad—unless I had the brandy. *You* to come to *me* in furs and feathers, and talk of your husband and your carriage—*you*, who were mine—*mine*—and who would be mine to this day, if I had my rights.’

‘Thank God, I am not!’ she cried indignantly. ‘How did you treat me when I was yours—with blows and curses.’

‘It was not I—it was the drink. I loved you, Paula, but you were cold and indifferent, and you despised me, and the thought drove me wild. But I am sorry for it now.’

‘I am glad you are sorry, Carl,’ she answered more gently, ‘because you know that you must soon stand before your Maker, and He will

accept your sorrow as a reparation for your sin. And He will forgive you, as I do.'

'Will you come and stand by me when I die?' he asked her hoarsely. 'Will you hold my hand till my soul has left my body? It frightens me to think of going alone.'

'I will come if I am able,' she replied; 'but you must not forget that I live seven miles from here, and I am not my own mistress.'

'And you were once *my wife*,' he muttered. 'God! how strange it seems that you should stand by me with dry eyes and speak to me as you do now.'

'Does it? Is is not stranger that you should forget the terrible gulf you opened between us with your own hand, and that you should have sent the unhappy girl you promised to cherish home to her mother, bruised and bleeding, and with an idiot child to keep as a remembrance of you? Carl, this is a solemn time for both of us, but I cannot forget (even in the midst of it) that you were no husband to me, but only an inhuman taskmaster.'

‘That’s right, kick a man when he’s down. It’s the way of women,’ replied Carl Bjornsën fiercely.

‘I hope not. I know that *I* feel nothing but a kindly wish to alleviate your sufferings now. But try not to think of me or the past. Speak only of yourself. Is there anything more that I can do for you?’

‘Not to-day. I’ve got my brandy, thanks to the old woman, and that’s better than wife or child to me.’

‘Paulie is better, you will be glad to hear that, and I have placed him with a kind woman, who will nurse him back to health.’

‘All right. I sha’n’t live to see it. He is under your care now, and you are responsible for him.’

‘Do the people here attend properly to you, Carl? Have you all you require?’

‘Yes; all I want is to be left alone, if you have no better consolation to give me than that.’

‘Then I will go,’ returned Paula; ‘but don’t

let us part unkindly, Carl. There has been enough of that between us already.'

'And now that you have a fine house and a good income, and everything you require, and are well out of my clutches, you can afford to be generous. That's about the long and the short of it, eh?'

Paula bit her lips to prevent an angry reply.

'I mean that I should like my last thoughts of you to be happier than they were at first. For all that has happened between us, Carl, I forgive you freely. Say that you forgive me, if anything in my conduct led to it.'

'You can believe anything you choose, and comfort yourself with any humbug you like. If the real truth were known, you hate me, and will be very glad when the earth rattles over my bones. But you dole out your money as a salve for your conscience when I'm gone, and you can't deny it.'

'I *do* deny it,' replied Paula. 'I have done what I could for you, because I pity you, and I think it is my duty, for the sake of what you

once were to me. But my conscience requires no salve, and if you choose to regard my kindness in so pernicious a light, I cannot help it. Good-bye, and may God forgive you.'

She turned, even as she spoke, and went down the stairs without casting another glance behind her.

As soon as she reached the little inn, she mounted her horse and rode quickly homeward. She was frightened at what had taken place, and at what might follow it. Since Carl Bjornsën had once more hold of the brandy bottle, there was no saying what disclosures he might choose to make. As Paula thought of it her heart beat like a sledge-hammer, and she wished she had never been so foolish as to seek out the man. Yet poor little Paulie! No, no! It must have been God's hand that had led her to the rescue of her unfortunate child, who would have been sent to the workhouse without her assistance. Yet she was feeling very miserable and very perplexed about it all when a circumstance happened that threw her into a state of the

greatest perturbation. As she rode past a lane that led to a neighbouring village, her husband turned quietly out of it, and stood in the road regarding her as if she had fallen from the skies.

‘*Paula,*’ he exclaimed in a voice of astonishment ‘where on earth do you come from? I thought you promised me to ride straight home.

‘*Promise.* Did I promise?’ she replied, in the utmost confusion. ‘Oh, I think not, Hal. If I had promised, I should have done as you say—’

‘But why didn’t you go home? You know my objection to your riding without a groom.’

‘Well, to tell you the truth, I felt as if I should enjoy a longer ride, and so I cantered a little way up the highroad. It is quite safe here, you know.’

‘You must have had a pretty good long canter,’ observed her husband gravely. ‘It is two hours since we parted.’

‘Is it really? But what brings you back so soon?’ she said, trying to speak lightly.

‘My horse cast a shoe near Balcombe, so I am taking him gently home. But I little thought I should meet you.’

‘My dear Hal, don’t talk as if I had committed a crime.’

‘I am vexed at it, I tell you frankly. Where did you leave Mr Foker?’

‘Little Foker? I’m sure I don’t know. The mare started when you threw off, and carried me over the first field. And by the time I returned he had gone—at least I never saw him again.’

‘He must have thought you rather discourteous. I wish you had told me you were going to ride further.’

‘My dear boy, how could I tell you if I were not sure of it myself? May one never have a sudden fancy? The day is fine, and I felt equal to it. So I thought I would take advantage of both circumstances. Is there anything so wonderful in that?’

‘Perhaps not. But I wish I had known it beforehand,’ he repeated obstinately.

And then they rode home together in silence,

both occupied with their own thoughts. As they stood in the hall together, and Hal was placing her riding-whip and his crop in the rack, he observed quickly,—

‘I wish you’d be *quite* open with me, Paula.’

She imagined he knew everything then, and started violently. Even in the darkened hall he could see the vivid colour rush into her face.

‘What do you mean?’ she cried. ‘How am I *not* open with you?’

‘I don’t mean to accuse you of regular deception, only I think, when we were discussing the advisability of your riding back from Bostock without a groom, that you must have had *some* idea of extending your morning’s exercise. And I would rather you had told me, even if I disapproved of it. I should like to think you were always quite frank with me, dear.’

She was about to frame some quick reply when a glance at his handsome honest face disarmed her. She *had* deceived him (though Heaven knew how unwillingly), and he had every

right to be angry with and reproach her. A sudden sense of guilt smote her conscience, and she threw her arms round his neck and burst into tears. But that was a penitence far beyond what Hal wished to see or had attempted to provoke.

‘Why, my darling!’ he exclaimed affectionately. ‘Is this the effect of my words? What a brute I must be. I only wished to caution you, my sweetheart. I am so anxious about you whenever you are out of my sight. It is only my love that made me speak, Paula. Oh, don’t cry like that or I shall wish I had never mentioned it.’

‘No, no, Hal. You are right, and I am wrong. And I *will* be open with you—I will, I will.’

A convulsive sob rose in her throat, and choked her further utterance. Her husband bent over her and kissed her fondly.

‘Now, Mrs Rushton,’ he said gaily, ‘I won’t have any more of this. The servants will think I have been beating you. Luncheon is ready, and so am I, so come along and give it me at once.’

He drew her into the dining-room, and began to talk of other things, and Paula was only too glad to change the subject and let it drop into the great gulf of forgetfulness. But as they rose from table it was renewed.

‘Lend me some money, love,’ said Hal carelessly. ‘Parrish is waiting below to have his bill settled, and I have parted with all my cash.’

‘How much do you want?’ asked Paula, all in a flutter.

‘Let me see,’ replied her husband, as he drew a piece of paper from his waistcoat pocket and examined it, ‘three pounds seventeen and six. I’ll give it you back to-morrow.’

Paula trembled. She knew she had not so much money left in her purse.

‘Must you pay Parrish to-day?’ she said.

Hal shrugged his shoulders.

‘*Must*,’ he echoed; ‘there’s no must in the matter, only the man is poor, and this is the second time he’s called for the settlement of his account. Why can’t you let me have it?’

‘Because—because,’ she stammered, ‘I’m afraid I haven’t as much money left, Hal.’

‘Nonsense, my dear. You forget. I gave you ten pounds last Monday.’

‘I know you did. But—but—I have spent it.’

Hal laughed. He thought she was joking.

‘*How* could you have spent ten pounds in a week, Paula? What have you spent it on?’

‘I—I—can’t remember, at least not in a minute. I suppose I’ve frittered it away on little things. I’m very sorry, but it is almost all gone, Hal.’

‘How much have you left?’ he asked gravely.

Paula opened her purse, and with a shaking hand counted out twenty-two shillings.

‘Whew!’ whistled Hal, ‘that is of no use. Well, I don’t want to find fault with you, my girl, but I *do* think eight pounds eighteen shillings rather a large sum to throw away in five days, and particularly when you can’t remember what you spent it on.’

‘I’m afraid I’ve been extravagant,’ faltered Paula, with a burning face. ‘But—but—’

‘Well, never mind, dear, for this once,’ said Hal kindly (for his was a most generous nature), ‘but don’t forget that our income *has* a limit. I will pay Parrish with a cheque instead, which is against my rule, as the country people look with great suspicion on a piece of paper as an equivalent for goods received.’

He went laughing from the room, but left Paula miserable, and wondering why he should have asked such a favour of her on the very day when she had been unable to grant it. Almost all her ten pounds, she knew, had gone in the cause of Carl Bjornsēn and little Paulie, and yet she had stood like a culprit before her husband, and feared to confess it. How she longed to tell him everything. How she hated the secret that lay between them, as she dragged her weary limbs up to her room and threw herself on the bed in an abandonment of despair.

Meanwhile Hal Rushton dismissed his creditor and walked forth into his grounds, whistling

softly to himself. He had not given a second thought to Paula's little bit of extravagance. It had surprised him because it was so unlike her, but he never interfered with the expenditure of her money, and he was a light-hearted young fellow who threw off care as a duck does water. He met his baby and her nurse in the drive, and taking little Edith in his own arms, carried her round the stables, and drew her chubby hand over the horses' sleek coats—for he was determined she should grow up to love all dumb animals as he did, and often talked of the day when she should ride round the farm with him on a little pony—and then he superintended the grooms' work, and walked down to the milking-shed, and took a look at the new plantation at the end of the drive, and visited the poultry woman to order the number of fowls that were to be slaughtered for market. After which, followed by half-a-dozen dogs, he strolled down to the village smithy to give directions about the shoeing of his hunter, and by the time he had finished talking to various

friends whom he met on his way, and turned his footsteps again towards Highbridge Hall, it was past five o'clock, and the winter's dusk was falling.

He was walking steadily along the road, whilst his dogs were burrowing in the banks after imaginary rats or starting the birds in the adjacent fields, when the village postman came tramping behind him.

'Any letters for me, Jones?' asked Hal cheerily, as the man reached his side.

'Yes, sir; and it's the last in the bag. I was going up to the Hall with it now.'

'Give it to me, and I'll save you the trouble of going further,' replied Hal.

'Thank ye, sir,' replied the postman, as he handed him the letter and turned back again.

Hal Rushton took the envelope in his hand and examined the address mechanically. As has been said before, his correspondence was seldom an interesting one, and he did not recognise the handwriting, which looked like that of a tradesman. It was nine chances to one that he did not put it in his pocket un-

opened, but the one chance predominated, and he broke the seal, and taking out the enclosure, he read it in the waning light. As his eye fell on the words which it contained his brow became ominously dark, and his unused hand clenched at his side.

‘Liars! cowards!’ he exclaimed aloud, as he finished the epistle. ‘By God, if I ever catch them, I will make them pay for this wicked slander.’

He fixed his eyes again upon the letter, and read it over two or three times in succession. It ran somewhat after this fashion:—

‘SIR,—The Ladies of Haltham would like to know who the gentleman at No. 15 Barefoot Lane, to whom Mrs R. is so attentive, may be. They presume he is a relative, as ladies don’t lavish their money or their presents, in an usual way, on strangers. Nor yet visit them in their bedrooms. Perhaps he is *an old acquaintance*. Haltham is proud to have had the honour of Mrs R.’s company three days running, but

would like to know the reason, and so I daresay would you.—From those who wish you well out of it,

THE LADIES OF HALTHAM.'

Hal Rushton was not a man to pay any attention (in an ordinary way) to an anonymous letter. If it had not tallied so much with his own observation, he would have torn it in pieces, and scattered it to the four winds of Heaven, and never given it another thought. But he was in love with his wife, and he had considered her behaviour during the last three days very strange, to say the least of it. Her unusual demeanour when she returned from Haltham on Wednesday with the story (a fabrication, perhaps) of having run over some tipsy vagrant, and fainted from the fright; her decided refusal to ride with him on Thursday, on the plea of preferring a walk, and then slinking off to Haltham again in the pony chaise to buy rusks, which the stable boy might have fetched for her at any time. And then her restlessness at night—Hal clenched his teeth when he thought of it—

and her murmuring a man's name, 'Carl,' in her sleep. He knew that 'Carl' had been her first husband's name, but the brute was dead, and she had both feared and hated him. She would never breath *his* name without an execration. But Carl was a very common appellation. There were hundreds of Carls knocking about England, worse luck. *Which* of them all had the wife of his bosom been thinking of when she murmured that name? Then the occurrence of the morning—Paula's decided disregard of his wishes, and her confusion on being asked the reason—the condition of her horse, lathered with foam, which proved how hard he had been ridden—and, Heavens! the money he had asked her for and she had been unable to produce—what had she done with it? And why did every detail of her behaviour coincide with this cruel and slanderous letter? Although the afternoon was chilly, the sweat stood on Hal Rushton's brow as he remembered these things, and his inability to account for them. He was very jealous of his wife's affection, and

he had a right to be, for ever since their marriage his heart had been as open to her as the day, and he had never done a single thing which he would have been ashamed for her to know. But though he despised and condemned the writer of the letter which was giving him so much pain, he could not help acknowledging that Paula's actions tallied with its insinuations. But who could the man be, and was it possible she had visited anyone without his knowledge? If she had done so, he argued it must have been for the sole purpose of charity, which, like most of her good deeds, his White Rose did in secret.

But why not confide in him, then—his common sense argued for him—why so much blushing and confusion and reticence—such unusual petulance as Paula had exhibited the last few days—such prevarication and uncalled-for emotion? Something was at the bottom of it, Hal felt sure of that—not the contents of this wretched letter, which he crumpled up and thrust into the deepest recesses of his pocket, but something of which he had not been told,

and which had unfortunately led to it. His first idea was to go straight home to his wife and show her the anonymous letter, and ask her for an explanation. And yet an inward feeling held him back. Would it not seem like an insult to her purity even to seek the refutation of such a scandalous falsehood? Would Paula ever forgive him for doubting her? Would it not be better to wait patiently until she came of her own accord and laid the explanation in his hands? But his mind did not confine its reasoning to the event of the moment. It wandered back over the past, and reviewed every circumstance that had militated against his wife's popularity in Deepdale. That first *escapade* in the schoolhouse. Of course she had explained it all satisfactorily to himself, and though he had never seen Seth Brunt, he had accepted her version of the story, and believed that the man who had been killed in the railway accident was the same who had visited her in the schoolhouse. But he had no proof of it, and now this wretched letter, with evident allusion to the

same circumstance, hinted that Paula's *protégé* at Haltham was 'an old acquaintance.' Was it possible that everybody knew more of the matter than he did, and that the evident dislike which the Deepdale matrons had conceived for his wife arose purely from their disbelief in her integrity? Could *that* be the reason that Lady Bristowe had discontinued to visit them, and that Mrs Measures seemed so uncomfortable and confused when he mentioned the subject to her? He would wrest the truth out of Mary Measures, though (Hal thought to himself fiercely), if he died for it. People should not say things about Paula behind his back that they were afraid to say to his face. Yes, that was his last determination. He would repeat nothing of what he had heard to Paula. He would bear the pain of it as best he could by himself. But he would take the first opportunity to consult Mrs Measures in a roundabout way. And meanwhile he would prevent his wife from going into Haltham again, and see how she took it. If she were passive in the matter, she could have no strong motive

for going there. And if she had, she would betray it in her face. But yet he did not—*could* not doubt her. Hal shed a few tears as he strolled up and down in the quickly gathering darkness, and then, ashamed of his weakness, dashed them away, with an oath, and began to make long strides towards home. But when he reached the Hall he entered the gun-room, where he usually transacted his farming business, and locking the door behind him, ordered Louisa to tell her mistress that he was engaged, and did not wish to be disturbed. And then he sat down, and laid his head upon the polished desk, and remained in the same position all the evening, trying to decide what he should do. When supper was announced, he rose and stumbled into the dining-room, with ruffled hair, and eyes reddened by thought and anxiety.

Paula feared at first he had been drinking, his appearance was so unusual and his answers so curt and roughly spoken. And when she rose, and tenderly inquiring if he were well, placed a hand upon his shoulder, he jerked it off (not

quite unkindly, but as though the touch oppressed him), and pleading a headache, walked out again into the night air, leaving her mournfully surprised at his behaviour, and with a heart palpitating to learn the cause. Her visit to Carl that morning had not left her very anxious to see him again, but she felt that she must know each day how he was going on, or the end might come without her knowledge. In fact, the unhappy girl did not know *what* to do. She dared not confide in her husband—she dared not confide in the doctor—and the vision that haunted her was that of Carl dying alone, and being thrust into a pauper's coffin and huddled into a pauper's grave. It was too terrible. He was a bad and reckless man, who deserved neither pity nor compassion, but he was the father of her child, and with some women that very natural fact goes an unnaturally long way. Her tender, romantic temperament, even in the midst of a domestic happiness which she would have died sooner than resign, could not help compassionating the luckless creature who had thrown

all his worldly chances away. And though she shrunk from his touch, and despised his weakness, she was restless away from him, and could settle down to nothing in Deepdale, whilst she did not know what was going on at number fifteen Barefoot Lane. She quite anticipated that, after her apparent rebellion of that morning, Hal would offer to be her escort on the following day, and she had arranged a most ingenious plan by which he was to leave her at a certain linendraper's shop to choose long-cloths and flannels for her clothing society, whilst he transacted whatever business he might have in Haltham. She could easily persuade him that her task would take an hour—there was so much to do and select—and that would give her ample time to run round during his absence both to Mrs Wilfred's and Barefoot Lane. She wanted to take some toys to little Paulie, to call up a smile in that wan, vacant face, and to feel she had done something to make the poor little fellow happy. But when the morrow, which was a Saturday, came, she found her husband

proof against all her entreaties that he would take her for a drive.

‘Hal dear,’ she commenced at breakfast, ‘what are your plans for to-day?’

‘I have made none,’ he answered, almost sullenly.

‘Then shall we ride or drive?’

‘Neither.’

‘What do you mean, dear?’

‘I mean that the horses have been overworked lately, and I intend to give them a rest.’

‘*Overworked*, Hal?’ she repeated incredulously.

‘Yes. They’ve had too much going in and out of Haltham to my mind, and a day’s stable will do them good. Horses are not made of cast-iron, as women seem to think. And you’ll be all the better for a rest too, I daresay.’

Paula did not know what to make of his manner, but she coloured as she answered gently,—

‘That is just why I hoped you would drive me into Haltham, dear. I thought I would

choose the materials for my clothing society at Millar's.'

'Not to-day. You must put it off for a while.'

'But to-morrow will be Sunday,' she argued.

'Yes. And Monday is a hunting day, when I shall require a couple of horses for myself, and have promised to lend the mare to the vicar's nephew. So, you see, the clothing society will have to wait.'

'I *do* see. And that the convenience of the vicar's nephew and yourself come before mine.'

'Well, d—n it all, you've been into Haltham every day this week!' exclaimed Hal, with a sudden burst of passion that was very unlike him to exhibit.

Paula rose quietly, and left the room without another word. It was the first time such a scene had taken place between her husband and herself, and she was quite unable to account for the cause. She knew nothing of the anonymous letter, that still lay crumpled up in the pocket of Hal's shooting jacket. If

she had, she would have gone down on her knees and confessed everything to him. All that day she was terribly restless, and Hal watched her actions keenly. She felt as if she could not stay in the house, but wandered about the grounds, as she deliberated what (in the event of her husband continuing his prohibition) she could possibly do. Her feud with the Deepdale ladies rebutted hardly here, for there was not one whom she could ask in a friendly way to give her a lift into Haltham. Mrs Measures, it is true, possessed a pony carriage, but her steed, alas, was not much better than 'Tubby,' and was seldom called upon to do more than a couple of miles, as he dragged the vicar's wife round the village on her parochial duties, and stood contentedly before each door whilst she talked with her humble friends within. And, beside Mary, there was no one from whom Paula could humble herself to ask a favour, neither was there such a thing as a fly or a vehicle of any sort to be hired in Deepdale. She thought of her

drives in Lady Bristowe's chariot with a sigh—even Mr Gribble's 'phee-aton' would have been an acceptable conveyence to her now. But she tried to console herself with the hope that all would go well in Haltham till the following week, and that Hal's extraordinary whim about the horses would evaporate before she had any need to use them.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DÉNOÛEMENT.

BUT she need not have imagined that Hal took no notice of her mood, or of her actions, for he watched both with the eyes of love sharpened by jealousy to those of a lynx. As she wandered aimlessly round the garden, or sat in a chair, with her listless hands lying folded in her lap, her husband was wondering if it were possible she was thinking of anyone but himself. When two people who really love each other lose for a while their trick of mutual confidence, their manners must become strained and uneasy. Both Paula and Hal were suffering deeply—he, who had been ready to stake

his life upon his wife's immaculate fidelity, from a terrible suspicion that, like many another man, he had been deceived—and she, because the world seemed too hard and cruel to walk through, and for the moment she was out of love with life, and dreaded lest even what had appeared to her a solemn duty might prove the destruction of her happiness. She did not know that Hal was watching her, but *she* watched *him* at every furtive moment, fearing to read some suspicion of her in his face, or to hear him demand an immediate explanation of her visits to Haltham. The position she found herself in, and the difficulties which loomed for her in the future, combined with the certain knowledge that, sooner or later, an explanation must ensue, made her restless, irritable, and unlike herself. The next day was Sunday, a bright, clear morning, and Hal Rushton supposed that, as usual, his wife would go to church. He was not a church-goer himself—he disliked the formality and publicity of the whole proceeding—but Paula had always

attended the morning service, and especially since she had become so intimate with Mary Measures. But on this particular Sunday, though the church bells were ringing through the village, she kept her seat before the fire, and made no attempt to move.

‘Are you not going to church this morning?’ he inquired.

‘No, Hal; it is too cold. I prefer to stay at home.’

Her husband laughed, not altogether agreeably.

‘I’m afraid whoever saw you riding or driving about all the week would stare at that excuse, Paula. The thermometer is three degrees higher than it was yesterday.’

‘Is it? But I am not aware that I owe an excuse to anybody.’

‘Perhaps not; but if you condescend to give one, let it be the truth.’

‘You have grown very particular all of a sudden, Hal. I will say I am lazy, then, if that will suit you better than the cold.’

‘Or that you have no inducement to leave the

house to-day, eh, Paula? Well, then, I'll stay at home and keep you company.'

'Yes, do, Hal,' she answered, more briskly than he had anticipated, 'and I will write some of your letters for you if you will let me.'

She held up her face to him for a kiss as she spoke, and he was just about to give it her, when a sudden recollection seemed to strike him, and he evaded the temptation and passed on. Her apparent pleasure at his remaining at home had seemed so like sincerity until he remembered that it was Sunday, a day on which he never allowed his horses nor servants to be worked without an actual necessity, and that she had no possible means of getting into Haltham without creating a public scandal. The baby opportunely appeared at this juncture, however, to prevent any attempt at explanation, and in romping with her the young parents forgot for a while their mutual anxieties. But as soon as little Edie was relegated to her nursery the same gloom settled down upon them—wretched doubt on one side, and harrowing suspense upon the other. As

soon as their early dinner was concluded, Mary Measures walked in, anxious to learn what had kept Paula from the morning service.

‘I was so afraid you might be ill, dear,’ she exclaimed, as she affectionately embraced her ‘and so I persuaded Edward to let me come over and spend the afternoon with you.’

‘How good of you, Mary, to give up the schools and afternoon service for my sake,’ replied Paula.

‘Oh, my dear, don’t think me wicked, but if you were a clergyman’s wife you would know what a relief it is to miss church sometimes. Of course I am glad to be able to help my husband in his parish duties, but when it comes to week after week, and year after year, it is apt to grow a little *ennuyante*, and it is quite delightful to get a holiday. And I have really earned it, for I had no sleep last night from toothache. But here am I talking of myself, and not a word about you. What is the matter, Paula? I have not seen you all the week. Are you not well?’

‘Oh, yes, I am all right,’ replied Paula, ‘only dull and tired.’

‘Dull? What have you been doing with yourself, then? Why didn’t you come over to me? Mr Rushton frightened us out of our wits on Thursday by declaring you were lost, but Green told our man you had only attempted to take “Tubby” into Haltham. Why didn’t you call at the vicarage for our “Tommy,” dear? The two harnessed together might have stimulated each other’s energies. What time did you get home that evening?’

‘Oh, not so very late,’ replied Paula confusedly; ‘but in a stupid village like this one cannot be out an hour after one’s usual time without creating a sensation. But come upstairs and take off your things, Mary, and let us have a cosy afternoon together.’

‘So we will, dear; but I must be back in time for evening church or Edward will be reading the Communion Service over me.’

The ladies left the room together, and went up to Paula’s chamber. As Mrs Measures was

engaged before the looking-glass, Louisa's voice was heard at the door, saying,—

‘Can I speak to you for a moment, ma’am?’

With an excuse to her friend, Paula went into the corridor to confront the servant.

‘What is it, Louisa?’

‘If you please, ma’am,’ said the girl, in a mysterious whisper, ‘there’s a man below as brought this note from Haltham, and he says he had strict orders to see it delivered in your own hands and no one’s else’s.’

Paula’s cheeks grew pallid as she opened the envelope. It was from Dr Brown, and the contents fulfilled her worst anticipations. Carl Bjornsën was sinking rapidly, and begging to see her again. The little doctor apologised for sending the news to her, but he was perplexed how to act, and thought she had better know the truth. The man could not live through the night. That was his opinion, and he left her to act as she thought best in the matter. The corridor seemed to spin round with her as she read the note. What was she to do? How

could she act? She pressed her two hands against her temples to try and still the buzzing in her ears.

‘Lor’, ma’am, how white you look,’ cried the girl, with whom her mistress was a great favourite.

Paula placed her hand upon Louisa’s shoulder.

‘Yes, Louisa,’ she said gently, ‘I am not well; but don’t mention it to—to—anybody.’

Then she pulled out her pocket-pencil, and writing the words ‘*I will come*’ at the bottom of the note, she refolded it, and told her maid to direct the man to carry it back to his employer just as it was.

‘Send him away as quickly as possible,’ she added faintly, ‘and don’t let them talk about it downstairs. And, Louisa, be in my room in half-an-hour. I have something particular to say to you. And—and—you will be silent?’

‘I won’t say a word to no one, dear mistress,’ replied the girl firmly, as she went on her errand.

Paula returned to the bedroom, and taking

up a flask of *eau-de-cologne*, threw it liberally over her face and head.

‘Paula, you are *not* well,’ exclaimed the vicar’s wife; ‘you are as white as a sheet.’

‘No, dear Mary, I am not well,’ she replied, ‘but please don’t mention it before my husband. I ask it as a particular favour. You will oblige me greatly by remembering it.’

‘Of course I won’t,’ said Mrs Measures; ‘but let us go back to the fire. I’m afraid you have caught a chill.’

Hal was still lounging in the dining-room, but when he saw his wife enter with Mary Measures he left them together and went out of the house. Paula fidgeted about for some time, unable to think of any excuse to leave her friend, when suddenly she said she had some directions to give in the kitchen, and flew up to the bedroom instead, where Louisa was patiently awaiting her.

‘Lousia, will you be my friend,’ she exclaimed, ‘and help me in a great perplexity?’

‘Oh, mistress, you may depend on me.

Didn't I nurse you through all your illness before Miss Edith came? And I know you have trouble, ma'am. I can't help seeing it.'

'You can be a great help to me, Louisa, if you will, and I'm sure you can trust me to ask you to do nothing wrong. There is a person in Haltham who is very anxious to see me, and I must go over there. Help me to do so. I see no possible way, and I feel nearly distracted.'

'But surely, ma'am, the master will let you have the carriage?'

'No, no, Louisa; the master mustn't know that I have gone. Don't look like that, girl. It is duty that takes me there, but a duty he does not acknowledge.'

'Can't you pretend to be sick, ma'am?'

'But Mr Rushton would enter my room.'

'Not if I said you had one of those terrible attacks of neuralgia, that make you almost blind. I'll say you've taken one of your doses of chloral, and then he won't think of disturbing you.'

‘Oh, thanks, Louisa. That is a clever thought, and you must tell Mrs Measures the same.’

She put on her hat and cloak as she spoke, and prepared to descend by the back staircase.

‘Pull down the blinds of my room, Louisa, and lock the door, and keep the key in your pocket, and let no one in till I return. Tell Mrs Measures I have been taken suddenly ill, and have gone to bed. Make my apologies to her—say anything you like.’

‘But, dear mistress, how are you going?’ cried Louisa. ‘You can’t walk all that way, surely!’

‘I don’t know. I must try. Some vehicle may pass me on the way. Only do as I tell you,’ and Paula flew down the staircase like a bird.

Louisa lowered the blinds and locked the door, and walked demurely down to the dining-room, where Mrs Measures was poring over a magazine.

‘If you please, ma’am,’ she began, ‘my mistress sends her love to you, and she’s very sorry, but

she can't come downstairs again just yet. Her head's so bad.'

'Why, what's the matter, Louisa?' exclaimed Mary Measures, rising from her seat. 'Is Mrs Rushton ill? I will go to her at once.'

'No, if you please, ma'am,' said the maid, barring the way. 'She gave me strict orders she was not to be disturbed. She's got one of them terrible attacks in the head. It came on suddenly when she was upstairs, and she nearly fainted. So I give her one of her doses of chloral, that Dr Addison ordered for her, and she's gone to bed, and mustn't be spoken to till she rouses of herself.'

'Oh, of course, if she has taken chloral,' replied the vicar's wife, as she reseated herself; 'but I wish she had sent for me first. However, I'll wait here for a little while and see if the attack goes off.'

She had sat there for the rest of the afternoon, however, feeling a little vexed by Paula's conduct, when Hal came in, and she repeated the story of his wife's illness to him.

There is nothing quickens a man's intelligence like jealousy. Every sense is on the alert then, and ready to add its quota to conviction. As soon as he heard the word 'chloral,' Hal brought his clenched fist down upon the table with an oath.

'It's a lie!' he exclaimed fiercely; 'a d—d lie, to cover some other subterfuge. She can't have taken chloral. There's none in the house.'

'Mr Rushton,' gasped the vicar's wife, offended and alarmed, 'what can you be thinking of to speak in such a way before me?'

'Oh, forgive me, Mrs Measures. I don't know what I am saying. I think I must be going mad.'

'But why should you doubt that poor Paula had taken chloral? You know she often does so.'

'Because it so happens, Mrs Measures, that the bottle is empty. I took it from her wardrobe some days ago, to try its effects on a poor brute that had to be operated on, and forgot to tell

my wife that I had used it. Who told you this untruth ?'

'It was Louisa, but she delivered it as a message from her mistress. I fancy you will find you are mistaken, Mr Rushton.'

'We will decide the matter,' he replied, as he rung the bell. Louisa answered it. 'You told Mrs Measures that your mistress had taken chloral and gone to sleep?' he said.

'Yes, sir,' replied the girl firmly, though she was trembling like a leaf, fearing he had met Paula on the road. 'She has one of her bad headaches, and she told me to let down the blinds, and she locked the door and took a dose of chloral, and went to bed, and left strict orders she wasn't to be disturbed.'

'Did you see her take the chloral?'

'Yes sir.'

(How beautifully women can lie when they have a mind to it. In whatever else they may fail, they are past-masters in the art of deception.)

'And from what bottle did she take it?'

‘From her own bottle, sir, that she keeps in the wardrobe.’

‘You are deceiving us, Louisa. There is no bottle of chloral in the wardrobe. I took it away days ago.’

The girl grew white.

‘The mistress told me—’ she faltered.

‘Where is your mistress?’ Tell me the truth.’

‘Up in her bedroom, sir.’

‘I’ll go and prove it for myself,’ said Hal, as he strode to the door.

‘But, sir—sir,’ cried Louisa pitifully, ‘she is asleep. You must not wake her. You know what the doctor said.’

‘I shall not wake her. People under the influence of chloral sleep very soundly. Give me the key of the room.’

‘It is locked inside, sir.’

‘Then I shall break it open,’ exclaimed Hal resolutely.

‘Oh, Mr Rushton,’ interposed Mrs Measures, ‘pray don’t do anything so violent. Consider

how alarmed poor Paula will be. Besides, why should you doubt Louisa's word ?'

'I have my reasons for doubting it, Mrs Measures, and I mean to be satisfied. Louisa, when your mistress has taken chloral before, you have always locked the door outside, and kept the key, so that we might enter it if she slept too long. You have the key in your pocket now. Hand it over to me.'

'But, master,' she commenced, whimpering.

'Do as I tell you. Give me the key.'

She drew it slowly from her pocket, and he snatched it from her and rushed upstairs, whilst Louisa began to sob, with her apron to her eyes.

'Oh, Louisa, what is all this about?' inquired Mrs Measures, in a tone of mournful surprise.

'It's nothing wrong, ma'am. Mistress has gone for a walk, that's all, but she thought the master would make a fuss about it, and so—'

She was interrupted by Hal rushing down again, with his face aflame with anger.

'It is as I expected,' he cried. 'You and your

mistress are in league to deceive me. The room is empty—the bed untouched. Where has she gone?’

‘I—don’t—know, sir,’ sobbed Louisa.

‘Another falsehood, I suppose,’ he shouted at her.

‘No, indeed, sir.’

‘Has anyone been here for your mistress to-day? I’ll discharge you if you keep anything back from me.’

‘Only—a man—with—a note,’ replied the servant.

‘Where did he come from?’

‘Haltham, please, sir.’

‘And she went back with him?’

‘Oh, no, sir; not for an hour afterwards.’

‘Very good, that will do. You can go,’ he said shortly, and Louisa scuttled back to the kitchen, with a heavy heart.

‘Mr Rushton,’ exclaimed Mrs Measures as soon as they were alone, ‘why are you so angry with Paula? What does all this mean?’

‘*Mean!*’ he replied, in a broken voice, as he

threw himself into a chair, and hid his face in his hands, 'it means that the woman I loved and trusted in, as I trust in Heaven, has deceived me, Mrs Measures, and that there is someone in Haltham at this present moment whom she cares for more than she does for me.'

'I don't believe it,' cried the vicar's wife stoutly. 'Someone has been misleading you. I wouldn't believe it from Paula's own lips.'

'Read that, then,' he answered, pulling the anonymous letter from his coat pocket, 'and then tell me how I can help believing.'

She smoothed out the crumpled paper and read the written slander, word for word, and then turned it over and read it a second time before she said,—

'And is it *possible* that you can place the information of a vile anonymous letter like this before all the affection which your wife has lavished on you? Hal Rushton, I am ashamed of you! You should have treated this communication with the contempt it deserves.'

'And so I should, if her conduct had not

tallied with its story. By hook or by crook, she has managed to get into Haltham every day this week, Mrs Measures, and I never should have found it out except by accident.'

'Well, and suppose she has. What of it?'

'You see what the letter says. She goes to visit some man in secret—some man to whom she gives money and presents. And all her money is gone, too. What *am* I to think?'

'That Paula is your true wife, and incapable of deceit.'

'What! after the specimen of her integrity you have just received?'

'It has surprised me, certainly,' replied Mary Measures, 'but, as a friend even, I would never doubt her until I had proved her untrue.'

'You are more trusting than I am,' said Hal Rushton, 'or you have less at stake. You would not speak so calmly if we were discussing the conduct of your husband instead of that of my wife.'

'I think I should—indeed I am *sure* I should.'

I love my husband dearly, and there can be no love without trust and confidence.'

'As much confidence as Paula has placed in me,' said Hal bitterly.

'You have yet to learn why she has felt compelled to withhold it for a little while. I feel sure it will be *only* for a while, and that with the explanation of the mystery all your doubts will melt away into thin air. Paula really interested in any man but yourself! Rubbish! I would as soon believe I was in love with Mr Gribble.'

'You are a staunch friend, and an able advocate, Mrs Measures,' said Hal gloomily, 'but I cannot follow you.'

'Let me be *your* friend also, then. What is it that you suspect?'

'Everything. My wife visits a man of whom she tells me nothing. Isn't that sufficient?'

'This gentleman who lives at number fifteen Barefoot Lane,' replied Mary Measures, referring to the letter. 'It doesn't sound like an aristocratic abode to me. Do you think she has gone there now?'

‘I feel *sure* of it. Where else should she be gone? And why should she have stooped to this deception?’

‘Why not clear up your doubts, then?’

‘How can I do it?’

‘By following your wife to this address, and judging, if she is there, and *why* she is there, with your own eyes.’

Hal sprung to his feet at the suggestion.

‘I will, I will. But if,’ he added, covering his face with his hands, ‘if—God help me!—I should find it to be true.’

‘It is *not* true,’ cried Mary Measures indignantly. ‘I would stake my soul upon her purity. And in proof of it, take me with you. Take me to Barefoot Lane, that I may convince you that my dear friend is above all suspicion.’

‘Will you really come with me?’

‘Have I not said it? Men may suspect the creature whom they think they love, but a woman’s friendship is too pure to harbour an unworthy doubt. If Paula has deceived you, it has been for the sake of others, and not for her-

self. Be a man, Hal Rushton. Follow her, and take her in your arms, and tell her never to insult your love again by being afraid to tell you everything. And I will go with you.'

'What about Mr Measures?'

'Let one of your servants take over a note to tell him I am detained here, and shall not be home for a few hours. My husband trusts me, and will not suspect that I am making love to some other man,' she said rather sarcastically.

'Ah, but you have never deceived him,' replied Hal, but his face was far brighter than it had been, even as he said the words; and whilst Mrs Measures wrote the note of explanation for her husband, he went with alacrity to order the horses to be put into the carriage.

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Meanwhile Paula, having walked as fast as she could lay her feet to the ground, until free from the scrutiny of her neighbours, felt that her strength was failing, and that she would not be able to go on foot much further. She was

deliberating in her mind as to which of the farmhouses which lay between Deepdale and Haltham she could apply for assistance, with the prospect of the least scandal, when she saw a tax-cart, being driven at a furious rate, coming along the road towards her. The driver was a young carter, and he would never have noticed her uplifted hand or call to him to stop if she had not stood in the middle of the road and made him (almost) drive over her. Then he pulled up short as he remarked,—

‘Hullo, missus, that was a near shave. If I had gone over yer, it wouldn’t ’ave been *my* fault.’

‘Where are you going?’ she demanded breathlessly.

The carter scratched his head with the butt end of his whip.

‘Well, I scarcely knows. The missus is ill in bed, and the master won’t leave ’er, so he sez to me, he sez, “George,” he sez, “tak’ the ould mare and gie ’er a good bucketing along the road.” So I was thinking I’d take ’er through

Deepdale, up to Parton Bridge, and round by Seaford.'

'It does not signify where you drive, then,' said Paula quickly, 'so will you take me to Haltham? I am in a hurry, and I cannot walk. I will pay you for it well,' she said, taking ten shillings from her purse.

'Will you gie me ten shillings for the ride?' said the carter, eyeing the money greedily. 'Then I'm your man, missus. Joomp up, and I'll have you in Haltham in no time, for the ould mare's got the jumps to-day.'

The lad, who (luckily for Paula) lived some distance the other side of Haltham, and had never seen nor heard of Mrs Rushton of High-bridge Hall, was as good as his word, and in less than an hour she found herself set down by Saint Mark's Church, at the top of Bare-foot Lane. She rapped at the door of number fifteen with a fast-beating heart. She feared so much she might be too late. The idea that Carl Bjornsën and she should part for all time on this side Eternity, without one word of

mutual forgiveness, was a terrible one to her. A little boy opened the door, and the first sight that met Paula's eyes was that of Mrs Sims sniffing and whining in a corner of the kitchen, with her apron over her head. This woman, who could be hard and indifferent to the sick, was ready (like all her class) to sob and moan over the dead whom she had never succoured nor cared for in life.

'Is he gone?' cried Paula, observing her studied emotion.

'Oh, dear, poor gentleman, I hope not,' groaned Mrs Sims, 'for it's a horful thing to 'ave a death in the 'ouse. But the doctor he's up there, and has been for the last hour, and Mrs Wilfred's with 'im, and the poor dear's as bad as 'e can be. But I do 'ope as they'll do something to bring 'im round so he can be moved. For to 'ave a death in the 'ouse—'

But Paula passed by her and heard no further. Her lamentations affected her no more than the "keening" of the mourners at an Irish funeral.

All her anxiety now was to reach the upper chamber before it was too late. What might happen when she got there she did not even stay to contemplate. Poor Carl, the merry, sunny-haired Carl she had once loved, was dying, and wanted to see her, and she would have gone to him if the whole of Deepdale had been assembled in his room. As she silently entered the door, her eye fell upon Paulie, seated in a corner, and gazing wonderingly at the different colours on an indiarubber ball which he held in his hand. He looked very different from what he had done when he passed into Mrs Wilfred's charge. His pale golden locks had been washed and dressed till they lay like rings of floss silk upon his forehead, and his grey eyes had a look of content in them as he examined his ball and the embroidery on his white pinafore, and the new socks and boots that adorned his little feet. Paula's heart went out to her child, and she could not help kissing him as she passed. The action attracted the attention of the

watchers by the dying bed, and Mrs Wilfred exclaimed,—

‘Lor’, ma’am, you’ve only just come in time. The poor soul’s been a-asking for you ever since the turn for death took place.’

‘He has but a few minutes more to live now, Mrs Rushton,’ added the doctor, ‘and I sent for Nurse Wilfred in case you were unable to come. I thought, too, he might ask for his little boy.’

‘I have made an effort—’ began Paula, in a trembling voice.

‘A most charitable effort, my dear lady,’ returned Dr Brown. ‘I really hardly expected you. And on a Sunday, too. But I thought, as you seemed interested in the case, I had better let you know.’

‘I am much obliged to you,’ said Paula, as she went up to the bedside.

Carl was lying propped up with pillows, to ease his labouring breath, with eyes wide open, and hands and forehead clammy and cold.

‘You are very ill, Carl,’ she whispered in his

ear. He bowed his head as he fixed his eyes upon her. 'Is there anything you wish to say to me before you go?'

'Yes. Send—them—away,' he said, with an effort.

'He wishes to speak to me alone. You won't mind, will you?' she said, with sweet, appealing eyes, to Dr Brown.

'Of course not. We will wait on the landing outside,' he replied, as he drew Mrs Wilfred away with him.

'Are they gone?' inquired Carl Bjornsën.

'Yes; we are quite alone. You can say what you like.'

'Paula, Paula,' he gasped, pulling her feebly towards him. 'Forgive, forgive.'

'I do forgive you, Carl. I *have* forgiven. And when we meet again, it will be all forgotten.'

'I was a brute,' he murmured, 'a brute.'

'Don't think of it any more. It is all over now. Think only where you are going—and the mercy of the God who will understand

your weakness, and cleanse you from your sin.'

'Will He forgive?'

'I am sure of it. Ask him, Carl, even with your last breath.'

'You—ask Him—for me.'

She knelt down by the bedside, and with the dying man's hand in hers, she addressed a few simple words to their mutual Father, that asked Him to forgive them both for all their shortcomings, and to permit them to meet again when this life was over. But as she rose from her knees she saw an awful change had come over the dying man's face.

'Nurse—doctor!' she cried in alarm.

Mrs Wilfred was the first to re-enter the room.

'Oh, hold 'im up, ma'am. Hold 'im up,' she exclaimed, 'for 'e's agoing.'

Paula passed her arm immediately under the patient's figure, so as to raise his head upon her breast, and there, after a few gasping sobs, Carl Bjornsén, who had insulted and ill-used her, and struck and injured her beyond all telling,

breathed out the remnant of his worthless life.

‘He’s gone,’ said the doctor, as Paula let the heavy head fall back from her arm upon the bed again. ‘Well, the poor fellow has had a more peaceful ending than I anticipated. And now, Mrs Rushton, that your charitable offices are no more required by him, you will let me take you away.’

‘Not yet,’ she replied, in a quiet voice, ‘not yet. Give me a moment to think what should be done.’

‘I have a patient waiting me,’ he commenced.

‘Go, go!’ she cried. ‘*You* are no longer needed here, and the kindness you have shown to this poor creature shall not be forgotten, I assure you. Mrs Wilfred will do all that is necessary at present, and for the rest—I will write you to-morrow.’

She sat down in a chair by the bedside, and buried her face in her hands. She did not weep. She wished she could have done so—she was only thinking—thinking.

‘Get her away as soon as you can,’ whispered the little doctor to the nurse; ‘she is overwrought. She had much better go home. The scene has been too much for her.’

‘All right, sir. I understand,’ replied Mrs Wilfred, as the doctor bustled away, and then she talked to the child for a few minutes, until the lady should be more composed. Finding she did not speak or move, however, she ventured after a time to go up to her and suggest that the last offices for the dead should be performed at once, and that it was desirable she should go downstairs.

‘Very well, I will go home,’ said Paula wearily, as she rose to her feet and kissed the child.

One look only she cast back upon the dead face of Carl Bjornsén, and then, with a heavy sigh, she descended to the lower room, and having told Mrs Sims what had occurred, passed out into the open air.

Just as she had closed the door, however, Hal Rushton’s phaeton came thundering round the corner of the street, and drew up close beside

her. She raised her eyes, and saw to her astonishment her husband and Mary Measures alight upon the pavement. Hal threw the reins to his groom.

‘Drive round to the “Black Horse,”’ he said, ‘and wait there till I come to you.’ Then, as the carriage disappeared, he turned to his wife and asked her, in a voice of subdued anger: ‘Why are you here, and where have you been?’

His tone roused Paula’s pride. It was so condemnatory. Mary’s arm was already thrust through hers, as she whispered,—

‘Don’t be frightened, darling. Tell him everything. I know there is nothing wrong—’

‘I am not frightened, Mary,’ replied Paula quietly, as she withdrew herself from her friend’s protecting clasp, ‘but I am waiting to hear of what my husband suspects me.’

‘You have come here in secret,’ said Hal, ‘and used a subterfuge in order to do so. I have been told there is someone at number fifteen whom you visit. Is it true?’

‘It is true,’ she answered.

‘A man?’

A man.’

‘Of your own station in life?’

‘Of my own station in life.’

‘Good God! and you can have the audacity—the shamelessness—to stand there and confess it to my very face. Perhaps you will tell me he is your lover—’

‘He *was* my lover—once,’ she said.

‘Oh, Paula, don’t say that,’ cried Mary, in a voice of distress.

I cannot say otherwise, Mary.’

Very good, madam,’ exclaimed Hal wrathfully, ‘then go back to your lover, for you don’t return to Highbridge Hall with me.’

I *am* going back, but *you* will come with me.’

‘I shall do no such thing, unless you wish to see murder committed.’

‘You will use no violence when you see him, I guarantee that.’

‘I refuse to go.’

‘Well, then, Hal, I say you *shall* go. You have insulted me by your suspicions. You owe me the opportunity of refuting them. Mary, you love me too well to suspect me of wrong. *You* will come with me, and see the man of whose existence I have been afraid as yet to tell my husband.’

‘Yes, Paula, you are right. We owe it to you to accept any explanation you may choose to offer us, and we will come. Mr Rushton, I speak for you as well as myself. You have been guided by me hitherto in this matter, do as I ask you now.’

‘Very well,’ he said, in a low voice, ‘but remember I will not answer for my actions.’

‘*I* answer for them,’ replied Paula calmly, as she walked back to number fifteen and demanded admittance.

‘Mrs Sims,’ she said with much dignity as she entered, ‘call Mrs Wilfred downstairs. This lady and gentleman wish to visit the attic with me alone.’

‘Very good, ma’am,’ replied the woman, as she rose and did as she was desired.

In another minute Mrs Wilfred passed them on the stairs, carrying little Paulie, whom Hal, in his excitement and curiosity, never even observed. When they reached the top landing, Paula paused, and looking at them with her mournful eyes, said,—

‘Silence, Hal, and uncover your head. In another moment you will stand in a grander presence than that of the poor creature you have stooped to be jealous of.’

She flung open the door, and they saw, stretched upon the coarse bed, the dead form of Carl Bjornsën. At the sight all Hal’s angry suspicions sunk to rest. He could not believe his wife had been holding assignations with the man who had once inhabited this wasted and neglected body.

‘Oh, Paula, this is some work of charity,’ cried Mary Measures. ‘But why have you kept it secret?’

‘Yes, *that* is the question to be answered now,’ said Hal. ‘If this was merely a work of charity, why has it been necessary to deceive your husband in order to carry it through?’

‘Because, Hal, this dead body is that of a person whom you made me solemnly promise never to mention to you again — whom you believed, and I believed, to be beyond the reach of troubling us any more. It is that of my first husband, Carl Bjornsën.’

‘*Your first husband*, Paula!’ exclaimed the vicar’s wife in amazement.

‘Ah, dear Mary, you will have a sad story to listen to now; but I am determined to conceal the truth no longer. It is sufficient for you to know at present that I was a wife and a mother before I met Hal, but I had divorced my husband. I believed I was a widow — so did my dear mother, but we were misinformed. To my horror, I met Captain Bjornsën in a dying condition in Haltham last Wednesday. I dared not tell Hal for fear he should forbid my succouring him, and I dared not turn my back upon his abject misery, lest God should desert me also in my dying hour. Oh, Hal, if I have been wrong, forgive me. I have longed so much to tell you all the truth, and I meant to

do so some day, when it was all past and over. I thought it better to act on my own impulse than to run the risk of flying in the face of your authority. But I have blundered somehow, and made you suspicious and angry with me. I am very, very sorry. I can say no more.'

'It was not your going into Haltham. It was a beastly anonymous letter I received about it,' grumbled Hal.

'Written, I daresay, by my friend Mrs Rushton. I have seen Ted Snaley lurking about here on two occasions,' replied Paula.

'Mr Rushton,' whispered Mary, nudging his elbow, 'what did I tell you you were to do when you saw dear Paula again?'

'You need not tell me twice, Mrs Measures. Paula, my darling, won't you come to me?' he said, as he held out his arms and she flew into them. 'My own wife! trust me more fully for the future. I am not such a brute as you seem to think. Had I known of this business, I would have helped you through it all.'

'Oh, Hal, dearest, you are so good. And I

am very foolish, but I feared that it would pain you, and revive the old sore. But it is over now, beyond recall. Poor Carl will never trouble us again. But there is little Paulie, Hal—'

'*Paulie!* and alive? Where did you find him?'

'In this garret, and almost on the brink of starvation. The woman who passed us on the stairs held him in her arms. My heart has been bleeding for my poor child all the week. This man stole him from Grassdene, and the loss caused my poor mother's death. Can't you see it all, Hal? He kidnapped Paulie, intending to black-mail mother and me for his restoration. But God struck him down with sickness, and he was unable to carry out his plan. When I met him again, he told me he had begged his way up to Haltham to place the boy in my care. It may not have been true. God knows. But he has gone to be judged for his actions in this life, and we are not the ones to decide what his punishment shall be.'

'I acknowledge it, Paula. And now, my dar-

ling wife, I want you to take your little boy and go straight home with Mrs Measures. James can drive you, and I will follow in due course of time.'

'*Take Paulie!*' she cried, brightening up. *May* I take him? But oh, Hal, if it should cause any unpleasantness for you.'

'My dear girl, we will have no more deception of any kind. Deepdale may think what it likes, but it shall know the truth. And I daresay, if you ask her, your kind friend here will take all the task off your hands of making it known.'

'Of course I will,' said Mrs Measures, 'and it will only be a three days' wonder. Besides, you would never be happy without your boy, Paula.'

'Oh, no,' she replied, her soft eyes beaming with maternal love. 'I have been so sad without him, you can't think. And now I shall be able to bring him up amongst the birds and the flowers he loves so well, and with my darling little Edie. How happy he will be! How happy I am! Hal, dear husband, how happy

you have made me. But why won't you come home with us?'

'Because, dearest, I don't want you to visit this sad room again. Let me settle everything with Dr Brown. It shall be in accordance with the position this poor fellow once held, believe me. And I will invent some excuse for having it so. I will say he was a poor relation, who had brought himself down in the world. The little doctor will understand.'

'I leave it all to you,' she replied. 'I leave myself, and all I am, and have, in your hands from this day henceforward, Hal. Heaven has been too good to me in giving me back my little Paulie. I want nothing more now to complete my earthly happiness.' She went up to the bed once more, and gazed on the marble countenance. 'God give you rest and forgiveness, Carl Bjornsën,' she said solemnly, and then, with a passionate embrace to her husband, she clasped her friend's hand and accompanied her downstairs.

.

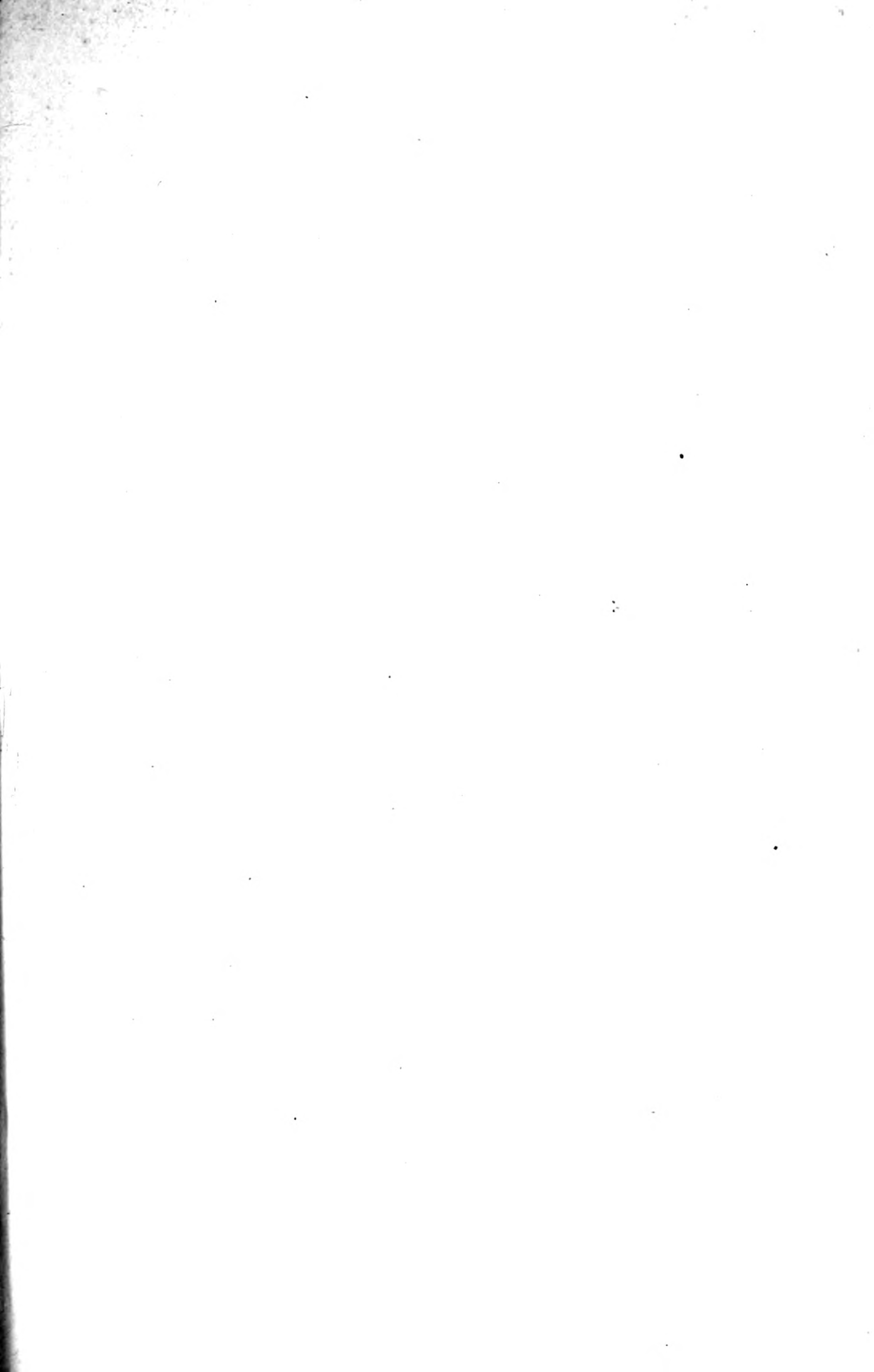
The story of her former marriage proved (as Mrs Measures had foretold) a three days' wonder in Deepdale, and then it was forgotten, and the villagers grew as accustomed to see little Paul wandering over the grounds of Highbridge Hall as to see his little sister trotting by his side and talking to him in her baby fashion. And after a while, when other little ones joined the family group, and became his daily companions and his teachers, Paulie's dormant intellect was drawn out by love, until his mother was as proud and fond of her pensive boy as if he had been a genius.

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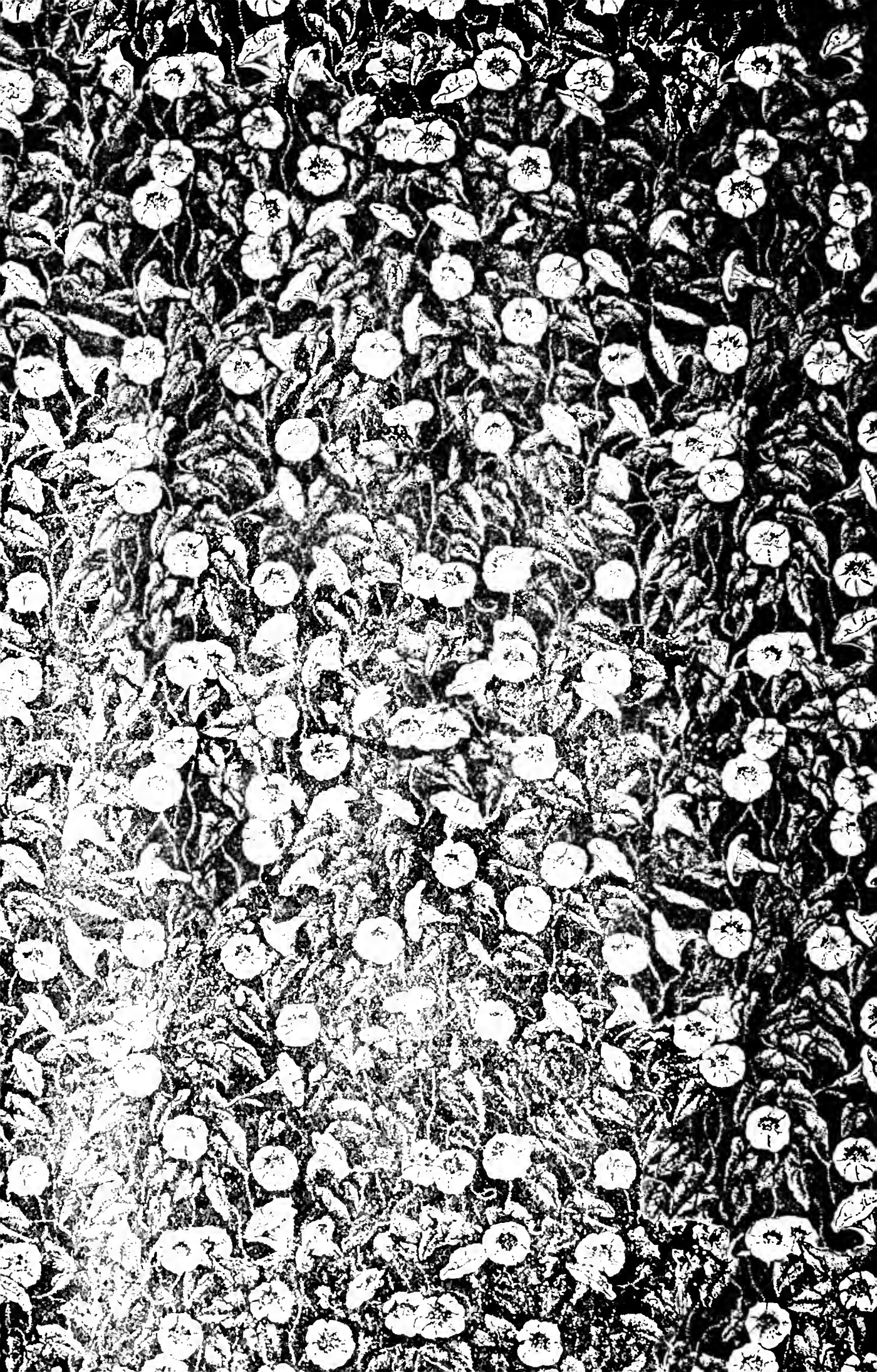
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